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EPISCOPAL DIVINITY SCHOOL

Thesis/Project

IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE:  
AN AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE SPIRITUALITY

BY

KWASI A. THORNELL

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KWASI A. THORNELL  
2004

Approved By

Supervisor Karen B Montagno

Karen B. Montagno, M.Div.  
Dean of Student and Community Life  
Dean of St. John's Memorial Chapel  
Instructor of Pastoral Theology

Reader William M. Kondrath

William Kondrath, D.Min  
Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology  
Director of Field Education

Reader Edward W. Rodman

Edward W. Rodman, D.H.L, D.D.  
Professor of Pastoral Theology and Urban Ministry



To my father, Harold Edgar Thornell, who walks with me still.

To My Brothers of Inspiration:

Robert W. Thornell

Jon H. Thornell

Haki R. Madhubuti

Nathan Jones

And

To my Sons:

K. Amir Thornell

Issa H. Thornell

Jason M. Cross

Grandson:

Ethan Amir Thornell

And to:

Linda, my wife.

Maya, my daughter.



## Preface

“In My Father’s House: An African America Male Ministry” is a work designed to fully empower a segment of God’s creation for the work of ministry in and out of the institutional church. It is my belief that there is a significant and underutilized community of potential believers who if empowered will be strong and faithful witnesses to God’s power and glory. It is my belief that working with African American men through retreats, prayer groups, the study of scripture, Rites of Passage programs, discussion groups, fellowship and service opportunities, we can help men understand the need for God in their lives. With this understanding they then can become strong in their love of God, their families, their communities and themselves. They will begin to understand that they must be instruments of liberation always, not living for self, but rather to do the will of God. This awareness is important for all of God’s people. It is particularly important for African American men because a relationship with God can be a source of empowerment that will give the tools for survival and liberation in a world that is often geared to their oppression and destruction.

The church has been the one constant in the African American community that has as its concern the well being of the African American community. It may not always be in the forefront of progressive activity, but its focus from the beginning of its existence has clearly been to be an instrument of community survival. The African American male has certainly been a beneficiary of the ministry of the church in terms of pushing for civil rights and educational opportunities, to name just two, but important areas. In order for African American men who are outside of the church to take full advantage of what a knowledge of God and the fellowship of the church can do for their lives, they must in



some way be introduced to God and then participate in a fellowship of believers. What this study suggests is that a great percentage of the African American male population has moved increasingly from past participation in a community in which there was knowledge of God to a lack of participation and an absence of the awareness of God in their lives. Increasingly, we are finding that many in the younger generations are growing up without any experience of church and have little knowledge of God. I do not believe that a person can be a whole being without God in their lives. Wholeness can only come into reality when the spiritual, physical and mental sides of their existence come together. When this coming together happens, it will empower African American men and boys to be able to live out the full potential of their creation. I believe that the church can play a vital role in working with individuals towards and achieving this goal of wholeness. It is also my belief that if the church and its clergy are willing to take on this challenge, the entire community will ultimately benefit. A ministry that focuses on the whole being will produce individuals, African American men and boys in this case, who will care about themselves, their love ones and their communities.

At the recent 74<sup>th</sup> General Convention of the Episcopal Church, a movement of evangelism called “2020” was empowered with funding and other resources to grow the church and to reach out to all segments of the community to bring them into active fellowship. The development of “In My Father’s House Ministries” is one attempt to work towards helping to fulfill this goal by reaching out to this particular part of God’s community. The purpose of this work is to help us understand the need for reaching African American men and boys with a spiritually empowering ministry.



## Acknowledgement

It is with sincere thanks that I acknowledge the extremely helpful and patient persons who read and critiqued this material to make it ready for presentation. They are Karen Montagno, William Kondrath, and Edward Rodman. I also wish to thank my wife, Linda for her editing and encouragement and support.



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## In My Father's House: An African American Male Ministry

### Introduction

It was the eve of Holy Week, April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Timothy Thomas was a young nineteen year old African American male running from the police through the streets of Cincinnati, Ohio. He had several warrants out for his arrest. As it turns out, all were for minor offenses such as unpaid parking tickets. For whatever reason, he felt that he needed to run from the police to avoid any jail time, however short it might be. This would turn out to be a fatal mistake in judgment for Timothy Thomas. The young white cop who was chasing him through the back streets of this poor community would also make a mistake in judgment. Perhaps in some fear of what might be around the next dark corner, he ran with his gun drawn and when he suddenly faced Timothy Thomas in a dead-end alley, his gun went off, killing Timothy instantly. This would be the fifteenth young African American male to be killed by the Cincinnati police under questionable circumstances in the last five years. It was 2:20 A.M., Palm Sunday morning.

The news of the killing hit the airwaves in the morning. I heard the report as I drove in to work at Christ Church Cathedral in downtown Cincinnati, less than a mile away from the community called Over the Rhine where Timothy Thomas was shot. We were living in a city already tense from the last killing of an unarmed Black man. As I began to prepare for the morning liturgy, I could sense that even in this largely white congregation there was concern over this latest shooting. From the very beginning there were too many unanswered questions. Those who came to celebrate this Palm Sunday



morning, to wave palms and carry banners and re-enact the parade with the traditional “All glory, laud, and honor” and shouts of “Hosannas” did so amidst the unasked question, “what’s going to happen next in our city?”

Nothing happened immediately. I continued my job as Canon Vicar at the Cathedral of making sure that everything was in place for the liturgies for Holy Week. When Tuesday arrived, however, the calm in the city would be broken. At a City Council hearing of the Justice Committee the community took over the meeting. They demanded answers and Angela Leisure, the mother of the slain young man, wanted to know why her son was killed. When they did not get satisfactory responses from the Mayor, the City Manager, the Police Chief, or the City Council members, the people poured out into the streets. They marched to the main police station to demonstrate their anger and their belief that the powers that be, the city leaders and the police, felt that they did not need to give an explanation in the case of the loss of life of a young Black man. It just happened. In this case of this latest killing, it was not going to be that easy. The word quickly spread and very soon the streets near downtown were filled with angry people, especially angry young Black men, ready to express their frustration in any way they could, beginning with taking to the streets in protest. Almost as quickly in response, the streets began to be filled with police in full riot gear, on foot and horseback. With this show of force, they would begin to act to regain control and to put to a halt to any notion that the streets would belong to the people.

The police began to show their force and intent in the first big gathering of people attempting to march downtown. Using beanbag projectiles, they shot at a young Black man who was clearly unarmed. He had his shirt off and his arms up. He made a mistake



of approaching the police. I was standing nearby with another minister and wanted to help the young man, but the police waved us off. Next they shot tear gas into the crowd and a white woman protester was shot in the head with a tear gas grenade. As the crowd began to run from the tear gas, I saw the woman on the ground bleeding, the other minister and I went to her aid, ignoring the police and trying to calm the situation with those standing by. This was the beginning stage of a riot in the streets of Cincinnati that would last for the next four days. It would also be the beginning of ministers from various churches and faith groups coming together to try to prevent any more killings from taking place and to attempt to bring calm, but also justice to a city that has a long history of racism and injustice. The ministers would also attempt to be the negotiators between the city powers and the community trying to get answers to the question why do the police respond towards the Black community in such violent ways that seemed all too frequently to lead to the deaths of so many Black men.

I came into the Priesthood in a time of social upheaval. Society was changing, being pushed by the civil rights movement and the anti-war protest against our involvement in Vietnam. The church was deeply involved in both movements and so was I. It was this social activism that brought me into the ministry and I often spent as much time in the streets as I did in the church organizing around social justice issues. I had often recognized that there was a contrast between the church and the reality of the streets, but the contrast between the two this Holy Week, 2001, would be far greater than ever before. In some very strange way the events of Holy Week going on at the same time as the riots made Holy Week more dramatic and real. For the next few days I would run back and forth between the two very different worlds of organizing the Holy Week



services at the established Christ Church Cathedral and being in the streets, attending strategy sessions and community meetings. Often the other ministers and I would be involved in just walking through the streets trying to convince the righteously angry people to go home or trying to negotiate with the police not to escalate the violence by reacting with undue force. In the early evening hours of Good Friday, I stood with other ministers in the middle of Central Parkway, a major street separating the downtown business community of the white establishment from the poor, mostly Black residential community called Over the Rhine. This parkway separated the two worlds, the world of the haves and the world of the have-nots. I stood with the others between angry young men and the police stone faced, on horseback, waiting for the order to act. “Crucify him, crucify him” they yelled in the Good Friday liturgy at the Cathedral services. As I stood in the crowd later that same day they yelled, “We want justice.” “We want respect.” I stood there face to face with a young man about the age of my own son. He said to me: “Why are you standing facing us and not standing with us? Why aren’t you facing the police with us?” My answer was “right now we are just trying to keep you from getting killed.” “We want respect,” he said, “and if we can’t get it then we might as well die, because we have nothing to live for.” At the heart of it all, respect was what this riot was all about, gaining respect or at least visibility. Not being, as Ralph Ellison wrote in his book of the same name, “the Invisible Man.” The young man’s final taunt was, “What has the church to say to us? Why are you here?” As the crowd backed off the confrontation, I looked for this young man to talk with him. When I found him I said “Can I talk with you?” He said “You have got nothing to say to me. I don’t want to talk with you.” I don’t know if it was the frustration of the week or the running back and forth



between two starkly contrasted worlds that finally got to me. Perhaps it was the seeing and feeling the anger and frustration of my own people in this continuing cycle of injustice that pierced my side. It might have been my own struggle to find the answer to the questions in my own mind. Why wasn't I on the side of the outraged members of the community in the streets as the young brother challenged? Whatever it was, I suddenly felt overwhelmed and beaten. When I heard the words from this young brother, who looked like my own son, scream at me, "You have nothing to say to me," it was like the nails that pierced the hands of Jesus on Good Friday were now piercing my heart. I was grabbed by my emotion. I sat on the curb. I was shaking and emotionally torn. What did I or the church have to say to him? Would any of the rituals that I found so important during this Holy Week have anything, anything to say to the hundreds of young African American men who daily find their lives without meaning, purpose or direction and who are constantly and consistently disrespected and taken for granted by a world that doesn't see them? Do I have anything to say to them that might give them hope, strength, purpose? Do I believe that there is any word from the Lord? It was at that moment that this project was born. It was as if the Lord was saying to me, 'Yes, I have words that can bring life to my children and you have to find a way to bring these words to them.' Jesus was saying to me "I love them and can't lose them. I've lost too many already. Too many don't know me, have never known me. Too many do not have the fullness of life because they do not know of my love. You have got to find a way to bring my love to them. You have got to find a way to let them know that they do not journey through this world, my world, alone. No matter what their pathway has been before, they can come into my



Father's house. There will be a room for them. There I will welcome them home with open arms. You must find a way to reach my children and bring them to me.”

When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’<sup>1</sup>

I must help my brothers find their way home to their Father’s house.

The mission is to develop a way for churches to reach out to African American men and young men and to bring them into an empowering relationship with God. For congregations that have a men’s group, but would like them to focus more on spiritual development than fund raising projects, a program will be created to achieve this goal. Retreats will be held to provide a way for men and young men to explore what it means to be a spiritual man of God in a setting that is supportive, but challenging. Churches need to assist young boys in their transition from being boys to becoming young men and “Rite of Passage” programs are a wonderful method of developing the whole person, mentally, physically and spiritually. Having a positive educational experience in the early formative years can make a significant difference in the development of male children. For this reason, a school will be started that will have significant male involvement and a

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 15:15-24, *The Leadership Bible*, the New International Version, 1998, The Zondervan Corp., Grand Rapids, Michigan.



parenting program. It will begin to instill recognition of the sacred in all of life and the wholeness of a relationship with God.



## II

### Reclaiming and Empowering Our Brothers for God

By a deep, wide river he sat down;  
With his head in his hands,  
God thought and thought,  
Till he thought: I'll make me a man!

Up from the bed of the river  
God scooped the clay;  
And by the bank of the river  
He kneeled him down;  
And there the great God Almighty  
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,  
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,  
Who rounded the earth in the middle of his hand;  
This Great God,  
Like a mammy bending over her baby,  
Kneeled down in the dust  
Toiling over a lump of clay  
Till he shaped it in his own image;  
  
Then into it he blew the breath of life,  
And man became a living soul.  
Amen. Amen.<sup>2</sup>

James Weldon Johnson

“Time to be a man and learn the ways of the world. Leave the church to the women”<sup>3</sup>

At the 1997 General Convention of the Episcopal Church, a resolution was adopted which stated:

RESOLVED: That this 72<sup>nd</sup> General Convention recognizes the importance of fathers in the life of their families, particularly in the life of their children; and

BE IT FUTHER RESOLVED: That this convention urges all Episcopal parishes to encourage the spiritual development of men, to preach and teach on the responsibilities and rewards of fatherhood, to encourage men to teach Sunday

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<sup>2</sup> Johnson, James Weldon, *God's Trombones*, Penguin Books, New York, 1969, p.20.

<sup>3</sup> Lincoln, C. Eric and Mamiya, Lawrence H. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1990, p. 305.



school, and to challenge all fathers to explore the implications and demonstrate the importance of full equality with mothers in their parenting roles.

This resolution was significant. Although it was passed, probably few really paid much attention to it, including myself. It came at a time, and probably was inspired by the beginning of the Promise Keepers program, an evangelism program for men. The Promise Keepers program, as well as the traditional Episcopal Men's Fellowship, the St. Andrew's Guild, has little popularity in most Episcopal churches because they are so traditional, conservative and narrow in their vision of the roles of men and women in church and society.

What I am proposing is not a replica of the Promise Keepers program or a rejuvenation of the St. Andrew's Guild. What I am proposing is that spiritual men, God-centered men reach out to other men and bring them into relationship with the meaning of having God in one's life. This is an evangelism effort to reclaim and to empower men for God's purpose. I am proposing a program be developed focusing on men, African American men and young boys that would have a spiritual base formed around the study of scripture, prayer and discussion groups. The two-fold purpose of such gatherings would be first to bring these men to an understanding of their relationship to God and what God wants of them as they journey through life. Secondly, that with this new relationship with God will come a new understanding of the self as a child of God. The expectation is that men would come to the understanding that life is not made up of compartments, but is a whole. The mental, physical and the spiritual self should all be connected and working together. The next step would be the development of a healthy relationship with one's spouse or partner and with one's children and being a strong and supportive parent. Because of the concern for the well-being of those we are responsible



for and in partnership with, the next step would be concern for the issues in the community which impact the well-being of family and community. Issues such as crime, violence, police community relations, drugs, quality education, employment opportunities, and other concerns would be given focus. This is the ultimate goal: to build spiritual men, God-centered men who are involved in church, family and community.

A review of the literature indicates that too few churches have given this type of men's ministry any focus. C. Eric Lincoln in his study of the Black Church and other more recent studies indicate that many men have no connection with a church and the larger percentage of most congregations, black or white is female. What we can speculate is that for many who have no experience of God is that they see themselves as the only moral compass. There is no being outside of them that gives them connection to creation or their Creator. They are simply here and wandering through this world as independent, unconnected beings. How they might choose to respond to the moral and ethical questions of life are based not on any theological reflection, but simply on human feelings and what works for or is accepted by the "group." This group might be the peers, the gang, or the corporation. The present debates which occur in the church community are not, for the most part, debates that concern their lives, at least not from a theological perspective. The questions about life and death, purpose and direction that they face every day are not answered in reference to a relationship with God. When they seek answers to these important questions, they seldom find their way to a church. Most enter church only when they die, if then. How many funerals of young Black men have we witnessed, killed because of gang related activity, drugs or AIDS? For the most part, these were not kids who sang in the church choir or served as acolytes on the altar.



On the other hand, those who are active in the church and involved are not involved in spiritual development and often have a prayer life that has little impact on their lives. They seldom, if ever, attend a Bible Study group. Those who go to church on Sunday are there physically, but in terms of their lives being influenced by the experience, the impact is minimal. In most Men's Fellowships, the discussion is around sports or the need to do a fund raiser. There is seldom a discussion around spiritual concerns or the challenge of life, marriage and raising children. There is seldom an opportunity or desire to discuss what it means to be a Black man living in America and what we are called to do as men of God. Men do not engage in "God Talk" when faced with the challenges of their lives. They are not comfortable talking this way. Is God not present in their lives or are they just unable to talk about Him? Can they articulate what Jesus means to their lives? Can Black men develop a theology of liberation that can radically change their lives, the lives of their families, their religious and secular communities, and their world? Can the church be an instrument that empowers Black men and boys once again as it did in years past? This is the challenge before us. I believe that it can and it must. In the next chapter, we will look at some studies on African American male involvement in church life.



### III

#### Reasons Why They Might Not Come

The masses of men live with their backs constantly against the wall. They are the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed. What does our religion say to them? The search for an answer to this question is perhaps the most important religious quest of modern life.<sup>4</sup>

Howard Thurman

There have been many studies focusing on the Black church and its history. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya's book, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*,<sup>5</sup> is a seminal work in this area. Another study in this area was done by Jawanza Kunjufu. He has written several books on youth, raising Black boys, value formation and other related topics. It is very important to him as a Christian and a Black man that our young people grow up with a knowledge of God in their lives. He is very concerned that more and more of our young men are growing without a knowledge of God and have no or little connection with any faith group. This is why he gives specific focus to the African American male in his book entitled *Adam: Where Are You?*<sup>6</sup> In this work Kunjufu focuses on the spiritual life of African American males. He is especially concerned with developing effective programs that work with African American youth, because he believes that as they grow into manhood a relationship with God will be a sustaining force to help them meet the challenges of life. In attempting to reach many of today's youth and Black men effectively we need to look at non-traditional approaches. There needs to be an infusion of urban and African culture that gives both a cultural/historical perspective in addition to spiritual resources to deal with the present

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<sup>4</sup> Thurman, Howard, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Abingdon Press, Richmond, Virginia, 1949, p.13.

<sup>5</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*.

<sup>6</sup> Kunjufu, Jawanza, *Adam: Where Are You?*, African American Image Press, Chicago, August, 1997.



day realities. Kunjufu writes in a language that is contemporary and recognizes the current values and lifestyles that are driving many, if not most, adult men and youth today. His writings also see the value in some of the practices of the past and suggest that we need to regain or hold on to some of those cultural and spiritual values that have helped us survive this far. It is necessary, Kunjufu believes, that we have a realistic and up-to-date picture of today's world and the challenges that especially face young men. These challenges are powerful and can have a strong impact on young lives. If the church is unable, or worse, unwilling to address the challenges head on, then we will become irrelevant in young lives and we will continue to lose our young people. As much as we would like to believe it, most African American youth do not have the norm of Black family life that is pictured in the television series "The Bill Cosby Show." Today's reality is that a large percentage of our Black youth grow up in single parent female-headed households. In 1920, 90% of African American fathers lived in the homes. By 1960 the number was 80%. By 1984 that same number was down to 38%.<sup>7</sup> This is only recognition of the absence of a positive male role model in the households, and not a comment on the strength of the Black female to take on the role of the head of the house and family. The impact is significant, however, when one grows up having strong positive male role models around, especially when one is finding his way into manhood.

I have been truly blessed by having my life and heritage filled with role models of strong, focused, achieving and spiritually-centered Black men. Some I knew personally, others I would only hear about in family stories because they have long since died. Three of these men were priests in the Episcopal Church, John William Perry (ordained 1882), Milton Moran Weston (ordained 1905) and M. Moran Weston (ordained 1950). Dr.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p.43



Weston was Rector of St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Harlem, one of the largest Episcopal churches in the country at the time and President of the Board of Carver Savings and Trust; a historic Black-owned savings and loan association. My grandfather on my mother's side was William Augustine Perry, a graduate of both Harvard and Yale in the early 1900's. He returned to Brunswick, Georgia, to build a school to educate his people in a segregated society. My own father, Harold Edgar Thornell came from a very poor background. He worked his way through college and medical school by serving as a porter on the railroad lines that ran the east coast corridor. He was a member of two liberation movements, the Sleeping Car Porters Union founded by A. Phillip Randolph, and as a Flight Surgeon with the Tuskegee Airman, the heroic division of African American fighter pilots who flew during the Second World War. As a doctor, he had his own practice and worked long hours serving the people in Detroit, Michigan. He always, however, put his family first and although he was not an overtly religious man, he took us to church every Sunday, and was very active in church organizations. His other passions were golf and football games. I believe that he enjoyed the sports, but also being in the company of other Black men in this fellowship activity.

It was from these role models that I learned about being Black and male in America. I learned of the challenges and responsibilities. I learned of the political realities, the struggles to have our place of freedom in this land and of the constant need to stand up for our rights as citizens and resist oppression. I also learned of the importance of a belief in God and of being part of a fellowship of believers and giving back to the community. All of my male role models were part of a church community. I did not know any Black men who did not attend church. I learned from them and my



own involvement that we are not alone on this earthly journey. Knowing that God is on our side and with us, gives us an internal strength that we would not have otherwise. I learned of the importance of family in the Black community and that being part of a family was a blessing and a gift that also carried with it responsibilities and accountabilities. In the African belief system, our ancestors are still with us and guiding us. I feel their presence today as I make decisions in my life and ministry. Peter J. Paris in *The Spirituality of African Peoples* affirms the importance of community and ancestors:

All African peoples agree that the tribal or ethnic community is the paramount social reality apart from which humanity cannot exist. Similarly, all agree that the community is a sacred phenomenon created by the supreme God, protected by the divinities, and governed by the ancestral spirits.<sup>8</sup>

What does this all mean? I know that in today's world the picture of the Black family has changed dramatically. Many children grow up not having their fathers present or not knowing their fathers at all, much less, grandfathers. Many do not have a nurturing environment that gives them a sense of protection, security, or love. There is also a critical absence of positive role models in their communities. I also know that many children have little or no awareness of God in their lives and feel that they must continue this earthly journey alone. *The One Hundred Black Men of America*, an international African American male mentoring program has as its slogan, "They will be what they see." Not having these internal and external guides can have a profound impact on an individual's development. It can also have an impact on our communities. As the African theologian John Mbiti says:

To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community. A person cannot detach himself from the religion of his group, for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundation, his context of security, his kinship and the

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<sup>8</sup> Paris, Peter J., *The Spirituality of African Peoples*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1995, p.51.



entire group of those who make him aware of his own existence. To be without one of these corporate elements is to be out of the whole picture. Therefore, to be without religion amounts to a self-excommunication from the entire life of society, and African peoples do not know how to exist without religion.<sup>9</sup>

Large numbers of Black men and youth are growing up without this connection to their cultural and spiritual roots and we are witnessing the results of this “self-excommunication.”

We are in a state of crisis in terms of Black men. One third of Black men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five are caught up in the juvenile and adult criminal justice system; that is, in jail, on parole, or in the court systems. Gun homicide is the leading cause of death of Black males between the ages of fifteen and thirty-four years of age.

According to the Center for Disease Control, African American teens represent 60 percent of new AIDS cases among those 13-19 years of age. For every three Black females in college there is one Black male. Black males comprise 13 percent of the population, yet they make up 35 percent of drug arrests, 55 percent of drug convictions, 74 percent of drug prisoners, and 50 percent of those on death row. Forty percent of Black males in America are illiterate.<sup>10</sup> The unemployment rate for Blacks is still twice that of whites. One in three children will grow up below the poverty line. Who do our children see as role models? In the class room only 4 percent of the teachers are male. The number is even lower in the early school years. There is almost a total absence of males in church schools, teaching about the love of God. So our children associate God and church with the feminine side of life, except for the preacher, although this is also

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<sup>9</sup> Mbiti, John S., *African Religions and Philosophy*, Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y., 1970, p.3.

<sup>10</sup> Sims, Darryl D., Editor, *Sound the Trumpet!*, Judson Press, Valley Forge, PA., 2002, p.xvii.



changing in the Black church where we have more and more clergy being females and becoming pastors or rectors.

Yes, we have more African Americans in business and in politics and in the military and in almost all aspects of life, but few of these images are such that they are encouraging on a day-to-day basis in the lives of our children. I will address this reality in a later chapter. Those of us who have had the privilege of seeing a broader world view owe it to our communities to bring this vision back so that others will not feel that their lives have no hope for the future and so give up as many have done. It is out of my privileged position that I want to share with those who have not had the experience of having positive role models while growing up. I want to bring to them an awareness of God and a sense of community. I want to help my brothers connect to the source of their being and to recognize the fullness that participation in a supportive faith community can bring. I want to help renew for some and ignite for others a sense of responsibility towards and oneness with their families, their communities and to their God.

In terms of youth in the church, Jawanza Kunjufu writes in *Adam: Where Are You?*, that it is during the teen age years that we lose most of our male young people. A part of the problem goes back to the absence of role models in the Black community and the church. In the introduction, he quotes Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr., Pastor of the wonderfully powerful and involved Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, a brilliant preacher and noted lecturer:

One of the reasons so many of our young African American brothers grow up ‘antichurch’ and not wanting to be part of the church—beyond the pressures of the peer group—is that they can’t see strong African American men in church, as a part of the church, loving the church, supporting the church, tithing to the church, building up the church and being the church.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Kunjufu, Jawanza, *Adam: Where Are You?*, p. viii



R. Eugene Pincham says, “You can’t be what you can’t see!” Kunjufu gives us some numbers to ponder. These are not the most current numbers, but are still reflective of the reality that exists in the Black community. There are about 40 million African Americans in the United States. Four out of ten attend church. Of that number 75% are female and 25% male. He points out that, fraternities and particularly the Nation of Islam are attractive to young African American males because they give identity and demand much. This is something that many urban youth seem to be seeking. For many this sense of belonging and acceptance is an attraction very similar to what the gang life offers.

Another prominent Black pastor, the Rev. Dr. Frank Reid, III, from Baltimore, Maryland comments on this attraction when he says, “Brothers turn to other religions when they have not been exposed to the authentic gospel of Jesus Christ. The major difference I see between becoming a member of a fraternity and becoming a Christian is that the former requires work, and the latter only requires a confession.”<sup>12</sup> Dr. Reid also raises the question, “If African American youth are not in church, where are they to hear the Gospel?”

Where are the men who are not in church on Sunday, and why are they not there? What about those men who are still in the homes with their families and yet still do not go to church with their families, where are they and what are they doing? There are many responses. Some of the brothers are legitimately working on Sunday morning jobs. The other brothers are taking care of the yard, involved in sports, golf, basketball, bowling, baseball or getting ready to go to or watch football games on TV. Some men are doing nothing as they do day in and day out. Juwanza Kunjufu asked this question

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 34



of the Black men he interviewed “Why don’t you attend church?” The answers fell into twenty- one reasons. The responses tell us a lot. I will list all of the reasons, commenting briefly on each.

Here are the twenty-one responses:

1. *Hypocrisy—what is being said in church and what was being done in the community does not connect.* Black men live with hypocrisy in America every day. When they see the church saying one thing, but living a different reality, they find it hard to accept and feel little reason to join.
2. *Ego/dictatorial... the wife comes home and says, “The Pastor said...” The male response is “What the Pastor says does not count in MY house.”* Black men might find it difficult hearing what others might say about their life styles and therefore would reject the word coming in their homes from the Pastor.
3. *There is difficulty with the passivity of Christian religion. How can you be the “Protector” and be called to turn the other cheek?* Two points here. Critics say that the church is not taking a strong stand against injustice, crime and violence in the community. It needs to be stronger in its leadership. Secondly, the Nation of Islam stressed the development of (image of) strong men who are protectors of community and family. The Christian church does not project this image and therefore seems weak in comparison.
4. *There is a difficulty with the faith and submission, trust and forgiveness aspect of religion.* Submission, trust, forgiveness are difficult concepts for many Black men to accept without a lot of questions. Society has taught them to not be trusting. Being submissive is still part of our remembrances of slavery. Forgiveness



requires recognition of wrongful behavior and a desire to change. Can we be forgiving of those who have oppressed us? Can we recognize our own faults enough to humble ourselves and ask for forgiveness?

5. *Tithing.* The question is what is happening to the money? Many do not see the money going to what they think it should go to. To many, the money in the collection plate is going to give the minister a good lifestyle or to build a big church to the glory of the pastor, not the glory of God. It is said that not enough is going to help the poor or the community.

6. *Irrelevance.* Some feel that the church does not address the problems of the community. Concerns around employment, housing, crime, drugs, oppression by the police and AIDS are issues that often the church is silent about, but are issues that concern many. Where is the church when a voice is needed?

7. *Eurocentric. White images and worship styles.* Even with the Black Theology movement and the Black identity movement, many Black congregations still have a white Jesus in pictures on their walls and in their Sunday school materials. This is not only being out of step with the community, but also perpetuates a lie about historic reality. Often worship is not inclusive of African and African American cultural art forms and music, thus denying our contributions to religious expressions.

8. *The length of the services. Too long!* Undoubtedly, Black worship is longer than most white worship services. Whether it is too long is a question about priorities. Is being on the golf course or at a football game for hours too long? Is giving a few hours to God out of a full week too long? On the other hand, if one feels that



they are getting nothing out of the hours spent in church, then the hours are “too long!”

9. *Too emotional.* For the most part, the Black church experience has been one where emotional release has been welcomed and encouraged. The worship experience has been a place where the pent up feelings from the week can be released and praise can be given to a loving and caring God who helped us get through it all. Since most Black men feel that it is not “manly” to be emotional in public, any display of emotion would be unacceptable.
10. *Sports. There is a conflict in scheduling.* School sporting activities are increasingly being scheduled on Sundays. In addition, professional sporting events are regularly played on Sunday either live or on T.V. Competition with the lure of the golf course has always been a challenge for middle-class Black congregations and now with the popularity of Tiger Woods, every body wants to get to the tee.
11. *Attire and dress codes.* This is a concern which many Black congregations are facing. For years the custom was to “dress in your Sunday best” to go to church. This was the expectation. Now with the more casual clothing styles and the number of men who do not own suits, churches need to lessen the expectation about “proper attire.” They need to welcome all who come.
12. *Classism/underemployment. You need money to go to church.* Money plays a big role in the church community. It allows the church to function and pay staff and to do good works. Giving to the church is also a mark of ones thanksgiving and commitment to the institution. However, money and the ability to give should not



be seen as a barrier to attendance. Remember the widow's mite? Somehow all must feel welcomed whether they have lots of money or no money.

13. *Education. Some have difficulty reading or can't read.* With as high as fifty percent drop out rates from high school, it is no wonder that there are increasing numbers who are having difficulty with reading. More and more congregations are trying to make services user friendly by not requiring a lot of reading. Of course, this is not the answer to a critical problem facing our community. The question is how can we turn this problem of poor education and dropping out of school around?

14. *Sexuality and Drugs. Sex outside of marriage and recreational drug use are discouraged.* The church has moral standards that it must hold on to. Life styles that are self destructive or destructive to family and community life have to be discouraged. The church can be a place where men can begin to discuss destructive behaviors if they know that it is a safe place for such discussion to take place and where they will not be condemned to hell if the behavior is made known in group settings.

15. *Homosexuality. Men having problems with gays in the church.* There is much discussion about homosexuality in the Episcopal Church, there is not much discussion within the Black church community except condemnation based on scripture. In truth, there is little willingness to openly discuss homosexuality and bi-sexuality in the Black community. The church is not willing to recognize the homosexual community that exists within its own ranks, its choirs and amongst the clergy. There can be no understanding without there being discussion. This is



a serious problem on many fronts. The spread of AIDS is an escalating crisis in our communities and not talking about behaviors that might lead to its spread is a serious problem. Discussions about human sexuality are not generally part of congregational life and many ministers are not prepared to lead informed discussions.

*16. Spirituality/worshipping. Feeling that one can have a spiritual relationship with God without the church. Many have problems with the church saying, “We are the way to God. If you don’t believe the way we do, you are going to hell!”* The purpose of the church is to help us interpret our relationship to God. Being part of a community helps develop insight beyond our own limited frame of reference. However we have to be in church to sense how the church is helpful in developing that spiritual relationship.

*17. Heaven will come, but right now we suffer and wait. On the other hand, you can have a last minute “do right” and still get in.* This is a question about suffering and how could a “loving” God have allowed all the suffering that Black people have had to endure in America from the slave trade to the present day? It is also a question about those who have done wrong having a “sudden conversion” and then be given forgiveness. This is particularly difficult for those who have suffered under oppression to understand.

*18. Evangelism. Many haven’t had anyone reach out to them.* Can one know the word of God if it has not been shared with them? The question is, if no one has invited them to church do they really care if they are there or not? Too few good



Christians actually extend an invitation to others to join them in attending their church.

*19. There is a lack of Christian role models. Can you be a saved Black man if you haven't seen a saved Black man?* We often speak of there being few positive role models in the Black community, especially models of Black men going to church. Certainly, attending church, telling the story of ones relationship to God, or sharing the joy of knowing Jesus is not part of casual conversation of most men.

*20. The streets and peer pressure.* In the streets and with friends there is little that one must live up to in order to be accepted. There are few demands or expectations, unlike church. Also the church is in competition with Saturday night life styles that make it hard to get up on Sunday mornings. More than likely, few men, especially young men, will hear from their peers "Let's go to church in the morning."

*21. Parental double standards.* As children, many are forced to attend church. As they grow, especially male children, are no longer made to attend or as part of their youthful rebellion, they challenge why they have to attend. Parents, especially where there is a single parent household, just give up fighting this battle and allow their youth to stop attending church. When parents do not attend because of the demands on their lives or just because they do not want to, it is hard to convince young people that it is important for them to attend.

The listing of Jawanza Kunjufu's study in *Adam: Where Are You?* gives us a picture of the challenges we face as we attempt to reach Black men and bring them into the church and into a relationship with God. There are additional factors that I believe are



also relevant to this study of why Black men and boys don't go to church. Changes in theological understanding as it relates to cultural behavior, the expectations of society, time and economic pressures, and many other factors have an impact on church attendance. What happens in church, the type of worship we experience also is an important factor in terms of church being attractive to men. I will touch on many of these concerns in later chapters.

Before leaving the points made in Kunjufu's research, I would like to comment on several that I believe are very important and critical to this study. These are areas that were raised repeatedly in the personal interviews that I conducted with a cross section of clergy. These questions were somewhat similar to Kunjufu's. What I asked was, "Why do you think more Black men do not come to church?" "What programs do you have for men and boys in your congregation?" Finally, I asked, "What outreach programs do you have targeting men and boys to bring them into church?" I gathered information about Black men in their communities and their churches in these interviews. I also sought their general perceptions of the spiritual lives of Black men.

Juwanza Kunjufu points out that many feel that there is hypocrisy within the church. They would say that the church does not live up to what it says. I would venture to say that this could be a general statement about the church as a whole and not the Black church alone. In interviews that I conducted, several said that they see this as a major reason why Black men stay away from church. For example, Jeremiah Wright (Trinity Church, Chicago) and Johnny Ray Youngblood (St. Paul's Community Church, Brooklyn) referred to the church by saying that it wants to welcome people, but does not create an environment that does so. Jeremiah Wright speaks of the church not dealing



with AIDS and homosexuality and turning a blind eye to those persons in need of the support of the church. Youngblood talks about men not feeling that they can talk about the real issues that challenge their lives because the church would think that they are not “spiritual issues.” How can the church be a healing place if it does not talk about the pain and the hurt that Black men feel? The Rev. Otis Moss, III (Tabernacle Baptist Church, Augusta, GA.) says:

Young people see the hypocrisy of the church all around them. They see how it does not stand up for them in the community. They see the church exist in a state of denial on issues of child abuse and homosexuality within its own institutions, but condemn these behaviors outside the church. They see the church saying it wants young people, but makes no or little effort to include them in the worship or program of the church, especially in areas of decision making.<sup>13</sup>

The comments that concern the hypocrisy of the church center mostly on the church preaching salvation and saving of souls, but not being present to the real issues impacting the daily lives of Black people in general and Black men in particular. Black men ask, “Why do I have to die before I can experience a little bit of heaven?” “Can’t the church do something about my earthly reality now?” The Rev. Cecil Murray, Sr. Minister of First AME Church, Los Angeles, put it this way:

My members expect the church to be present in the community and to deal with the issues that face them on a daily basis. Men are attracted to this church because we try not to be hypocritical about the expectations we place on all our members. We expect them to be involved with the issues and we expect our brothers to step up to the plate and be present in times of community crisis. They need to be present for the young brothers and they need to help the single sisters in raising these young hot heads. I talk hard and real with them about the challenges we face together.<sup>14</sup>

The church cannot talk about “saving souls” while all around them lives are being lost to drugs, crime and violence daily. The church cannot be taken seriously if it is not present

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Rev. Otis Moss, III, June 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Rev. Cecil Murray, August , 1993



in helping people who are hurting. This is where the charge of hypocrisy is most often lodged.

In my interviews with church leaders, several felt that Black men were angry because they felt “abandoned” by God. Therefore they found that it was very hard for them to have faith or have trust in a God who they felt has not been there for them. On the other hand, Black men felt that they had done things in their lives that they know God would not approve of and so they turned away from God because they felt they could never be forgiven for what they had done. The Rev. William Land, (Amistad United Church of Christ, Cincinnati, OH.) and the Rev. Johnny Ray Youngblood talked about this conflict. Rev. Youngblood says:

Many Black men will drop their wives or girlfriends at the door of the church because they do not believe that church will accept them for who they are. They know that they have turned away from God and do not believe that God can ever forgive them for the life they live. They don’t believe that the church even wants to hear about what they are involved in and if they can’t talk about it, how are they going to change? Can they trust the church, God, to not banish them? They are ashamed at their own behavior. They know that they are not doing what God would want them to do. They rather just not face it.<sup>15</sup>

Rev. William Land says that the idea of submission is difficult for Black men on many fronts. “They feel that it is not being strong,” Rev. Land says. His experience is with the Nation of Islam. He says that the Nation of Islam has a way of combining being strong with submitting to the authority of the leadership of the institution. Rev. Land says that they are most successful with men who have few options. He believes that Black men have to feel that they have no choice but to submit before they are willing to do so. In other words, “I know that I cannot do it on my own anymore. I will not survive.” Rev. Land speaks of his experience with those Black men who feel that once they have made

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with Rev. Johnny Ray Youngblood, February 2002.



the determination to turn their lives over to God or Allah, then they become stronger. It is the getting to that point that is the difficult step to take. “Black men tend to want to be the center of their own lives. To be told that they must place Jesus at the center and God first in their lives, is a challenge for them.”<sup>16</sup>

The next chapter will give focus to being the inviting church. Before leaving this chapter, however, I would like to bring together a couple of points that Kunjufu makes about evangelism, inviting men to church and making them welcome once they arrive. Many feel that if they go to a church they must become like that church. For example, they must dress like the members of the church, like the music that the church sings, accept the culture of the church and leave their culture at the door. So evangelists go out and invite people in the community to church and when they come to the church they realize that if they are going to worship in that particular church they are going to have to become like the present members or they will not be welcomed. Nothing is more of a reality check in this area than attire and dress codes. In two of my interviews, the issue of proper attire came up as a serious concern and one that the church had to face. In the congregations of Elder Thurman E. Evans, (Morning Star Community Tabernacle, Linden, New Jersey) and Rev. Rudy Rasmus, St. John’s United Methodist Church, Houston, Texas) they made serious efforts at evangelism and realized that congregational expectations had to be altered.

Elder Evans has a program that went out into the community on Saturday mornings and talked to men about coming to church on Sunday. They went up and down the streets, into the barber shops, and the bowling alleys. They invited men to join them for breakfast on Sunday morning and to stay for the worship services. They stressed that

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Rev. William Land, April , 2003.



they didn't have to wear suits if they didn't want to, because they know that many of these men didn't own a suit. Elder Evans reported:

We talked about what we would have to do to make these men welcomed and how we might have to change our own expectations. We also said that we wanted them to feel recognized, but not embarrassed in any way. So when they came to breakfast, we didn't have them all sit in one place. They sat with everybody else. And when some stayed for the church service, we invited them to stand only if they wanted to and say a word. There was no pressure. If they did stand, they were warmly greeted by the congregation and invited to join the church. Some did and became regular members. Men need to be encouraged to come to church. They need to feel that there is a place for them and that they are wanted there.<sup>17</sup>

In an interview with Rev. Rudy Rasmus, describes how his congregation adapted their attire, including that of the clergy staff, to make everyone feel comfortable and to take away the dress expectation question out of attending church.

In St. John's United Methodist Church, Houston, it would be hard to distinguish who was who by dress. We are a downtown congregation in a mixed income community. We have members from all walks of life from those with high incomes to those who have no income at all. To make everyone feel welcomed and comfortable, we adopted a standard uniform of blue work shirts and tan skirts or slacks. No suits or ties. Even the ministers wear these same outfits. We felt that if the leadership did not model this, it would be hard for the congregation to change years of indoctrination about "proper attire" at church. We want people who come to our center during the week for assistance of any kind to feel that they are welcomed to come to church on Sunday and get assistance of a spiritual kind."<sup>18</sup>

There is one thing that is more important than what Black men wear in church and that is that they be in church. Juwanza Kunjufu cites as a major problem in this regards is that often, no one extends an invitation to Black men and young men to come to church. Think about the possible reasoning for this. Who is the most feared and suspect being in the white and Black community? In too many cases, it still is the Black man and especially the young Black man. They are followed in stores, stopped by the police for

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Elder Thurman E. Evans, June 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Interview, Rev. Rudy Rasmus, August, 2002



little or no reason and watched carefully when they turn up in places where they are not known or expected. The Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker, well known for being a close associate of Dr. Martin Luther King and Pastor of Canaan Baptist Church, Harlem, N.Y., confesses that he has no program to bring men into the church. "Black men tend to stay away from the church because they are less emotional than women. Most of my bible studies and prayer groups are made up of women."<sup>19</sup> I have found that if you take the time to talk to men about God and the church, then they are thankful that they were invited and will come at least for a visit.

In the October of 2002, I interviewed a group of young men as part of my research. I invited them to talk with me about their relationship with God and their feelings about the church. I was surprised at how easily they shared their stories and views. They were all between the ages of 21 and 25. None of them attended church on a regular basis, but all had attended church up until they were fourteen or fifteen years of age. For various reasons they stopped, either their parents stopped going or said that they were old enough to decide if they wanted to attend or not. When given that choice, they simply stopped going. They said that when they did go to church they felt out of place, not welcomed or overwhelmed and pressured because too much attention was given to their presence. They also said that clothes were an issue. They didn't want to wear a suit, but felt uncomfortable attending church without one on. They were eager to talk about their relationship to God and to the church. They felt that their generation believed in God and that they and many of their friends had a relationship with God even though they did not attend church on a regular basis. They said that few people invited them to church and no one had ever asked them how they felt about God and the church before. They

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<sup>19</sup> Interview, Rev. Waytt Tee Walker, June, 2003.



were glad that someone finally did want to know how they felt. They said that if they could find a church that spoke to the issues that concerned young people and had better music, they would attend because they saw church as being important.<sup>20</sup>

These interviews and the research would indicate that there is a “mission field” ripe for harvest in terms of ministries which focus on bringing men into churches. What will it take to keep them there once they enter the doors?

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with young men in Miami, Florida, October , 2002.



## IV

### Worship and Being the Inviting Church

*I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.” Romans 1:11-12*

*Come Sunday, Oh, come Sunday that's the day.  
Lord, dear Lord above, God almighty, God of love,  
Please look down and see my people through.  
Duke Ellington<sup>21</sup>*

Worship is where we grab people. If the worship service does not speak to them or strike some cord in their spirit, if they do not see a point of inclusion, then more than likely we will not hold on to those who attend on Sunday mornings. The question before us is once we have invited men and boys who are outside of the church to come and join us, how do we make them feel welcomed and give them a sense that this indeed is a home for them? A second question is how do we hold on to the young men and boys that we have in church so that they don't feel the need to leave when peer pressure or life styles changes challenge their continued attendance. Creating the welcoming environment will be a challenge for all of us. For me, family expectations had a lot to do with my staying in church, but also it being a community of support and fellowship made a real difference.

I am fifty-nine years old. I can't remember a full month in my life that I did not go to church at least two out of the four Sundays. Most of my life, I was there every Sunday. As a young child, I went with my family. I didn't have a choice. It was what we did on that day of the week and I began to look forward to it because of the fellowship I would find with my friends in church and during the social times. Church was so much a

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<sup>21</sup> *Come Sunday*, music and words by Duke Ellington, Copyright, 1946, G. Schirmer, Inc.



part of my life that even when I left home for college I continued to go to church. I need to say here that I grew up in the Episcopal Church, the church of many of America's founding Fathers. This was the church of my family since before 1882 when my great-great cousin was ordained an Episcopal Priest.<sup>22</sup> It was the worship of this church that I knew. I didn't know that there was another way to give meaningful praise to God until the early sixties.

Even though the congregations in which I grew up were African American, the worship style was European. We seldom sang spirituals and never sang gospel songs that I can remember. There were no "Amens" or "Hallelujahs," no talking back to the preacher and certainly no hand clapping. The choir did not sway, it barely moved. The preacher would raise his voice, every now and then, just to wake up those who were sleeping. We did have a lot of ritual, however, lots of vestments, processions, candles, incense, bells and acolytes, sometimes wearing white gloves. I took all this in. I loved the ritual as an acolyte, sometimes serving three services on Sunday mornings. For me growing up, this was enough. I wasn't looking for more. This would all change when I was exposed to the "Black" church experience in college.

The first real introduction to the "Black" church experience was during the civil rights movement as those of us in the movement visited other Black churches, sang freedom songs which were really re-worked Gospel songs, and felt the power of what a "spirit-filled" church was like. I went to Morehouse College for a semester and heard "real" preaching with feeling and emotion and relevance and singing that awakened something inside that I did not know was there spiritually. It was a whole new way of

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<sup>22</sup> I make this point because most white people and many Black people believe that a Black person in the Episcopal Church is more than likely a recent convert, coming from one of the Black denominations.



looking at and “feeling” the presence of God. It was during these experiences that I felt, emotionally, the presence of God. It came from the experience, the fellowship, the relating in a very real way God’s word with the struggle in which we were all engaged in the late fifties and sixties. This new experience in worship, a worship that was speaking to my awakening Blackness and social conscience, was liberating my soul. It was, however, putting me at odds with the tradition in which I had grown up. The contrast is painted in words most vividly by Salindra Sharp’s poem, “Home Church.”

I have seen the church of the Naked City.  
I sit, as on the last morning, and listen to  
The strict hymns, the rehearsed lecture  
The professional choir.  
There are no mistakes allowed in the Church of the Naked City.  
And there are no Amens, no Hallelujahs, and sings,  
And sits, and listens, and raised, and exits.  
Some smile complacently;  
Those who won smile possessively.  
Strangers feign, when appropriate, and hurry away.  
I have prayed in the church of the Naked City,  
A prayer full of red lights, running feet, and  
Cold solidarity.

Soon I’m going home.  
I will enter,  
And they will shake hands warmly;  
I will sit,  
And their smiles will say “Welcome home!”  
I will sing  
And their smiles will say “Welcome home!”  
I will sing  
And tears will roll with joy;  
I will sit  
Among Amen! And Hallelujahs!  
Sunlight streaming in the balcony.  
I will listen.  
And words I have heard before  
Will sound fresh and new;  
I will rise  
And greet the warm smiles of the young,  
The fragile cheeks of the elderly,



The strong hugs of those who prayed when I could not.  
I will exit  
Amid the laughter of love.  
And there will be no words with which to pray-  
It will all be understood.

When I return to the Naked City  
I will enter, not seeking;  
I will sit,  
With more to offer than they can give.  
I will sing a remembered song,  
I will listen to words brought with me;  
I will exit,  
Secure in the knowledge  
That there is one, never far, called Home.<sup>23</sup>

It is ironic that the warm feelings were there in the churches that I grew up in, but not the ability to express them in the context of worship. The question for me was, “Why not?” Why there was this disconnect with how we worshipped and how we lived or even feel? We as Black people are a spiritual people, a feeling people; we too, know the personal relationship with God and “my Jesus.” When I came home to my Episcopal “home church” in Detroit, Michigan, I did receive the warm smiles. I remember, however, on a particular Sunday, when the hymn we were singing “accidentally” had a little rhythm to it and I began to move with the music, I quickly received a sharp nudge from my mother, as if to say, “We don’t move in this church. Be still!”

Well, it seemed that in the late sixties, others in predominately white denominations who found their Black selves awakening also felt the disconnect. We began to explore how we could stay in the church we knew, but bring in the spirit and feeling, the singing and music of the traditional “Black” church, and yes the preaching that spoke to “who we were, and whose we were.” Roman Catholics, United Methodists, Episcopalian, Presbyterians, United Church of Christ members, through their Black

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<sup>23</sup> “Home Church”, Salindra Sharp, *Freeing the Spirit Magazine*, 1981, Vol.1, No. 1.



caucuses began to develop liturgies that reflected the Black experience. This in reality had a dual purpose. First, it was an evangelism tool to reach out to the community that immediately surrounded many urban churches. Secondly, the change helped those with an awakened Black consciousness to remain in the churches they generally loved and find at the same time a spiritual renewal to fight oppression. For us in the Episcopal Church, it would be the Union of Black Episcopalians that would take us down this wonderful journey. As we began to develop liturgies that spoke to our culture, history and political struggles, we saw the walls break down that had put our lives into compartments. This is the sacred. This is the political. This is the social. We also began to understand how liturgy in the past had been used by the colonial and slave owners to create this separate “spiritual compartment.” This is your spiritual world and this is the secular world. We speak a different language and of a different reality. We found ourselves saying that this is not acceptable. God speaks to us in today’s world and our worship should speak to this world also.

One of the challenges of the response to Kunjufu’s, *“Adam: Where Are You?*, a study on why Black men do not attend church, was that worship was not meaningful to them because it did not speak to their current reality. Even though the largest percentage of those who attend church are women, we know that enough Black men go to church and have gone to church over time that it does speak to a reality for some. Most of our leadership over our history in terms of the Black community has emerged from the church and many of our secular leaders have had or have roots firmly rooted in the Black church experience. For African Americans, our church involvement and our relationship to God has been the only sustaining force that has brought us through the racism and



oppression that we found since coming to or being brought to these American shores. We already had the deep spirituality when we arrived. We took that and combined it with the church that was given to us or forced on us and made it fit our needs.

From the secret gatherings in fields during slavery, we have grown to thousands of community churches and in some cases Mega-Word churches that have membership in the thousands, enormous choirs and bands and projection screens where the words of music and the scripture are projected for all to see and follow along. We have the traditional churches where the service is prescribed and in “good order” and we have the churches where only the Pastor knows the order and he can change it at will. There are some where the “Holy Spirit” can fly through at any moment taking both male and female to a height of spiritual ecstasy that allows them to speak in tongues unknown. We have churches that have political agendas and spend a great deal of time organizing for community action. We have other churches where the leadership and members have given up on this old world and are only living so they can get to heaven and therefore see no need to get involved with the challenges of present day life. We have some that worship in the European style and others that worship in an African tradition, using drums and “African” vestments. In worship style, we are high and low and everything in-between.

We have made of the church what we needed it to be, a tool for our survival and a way to understand God’s work in the world and in our lives. Yet like most institutions, it is not perfect and can do more. In the responses to Juwanza Kunjufu’s survey and in the interviews which I conducted there are some re-occurring themes as to why Black men are not attending church. Among them is the impact of worship. Because worship is the



primary introduction to church for most people, it is important that we look at some practical steps that churches can take in this area to respond to the needs of Black men and youth.

Some say it is because they find nothing that relates to their experience, no reflection in the words that speaks to the struggles they are engaged with in their daily lives. Men also say that they often find that there is too much that has to be read and too many books with which to fumble. Within some of our Episcopal Church liturgies one could be asked to juggle a bulletin, a prayer book and several song books all in one service. This can even be a challenge for a seasoned worshipper. It certainly is not inviting to newcomers. Persons who are required to read a lot, but are personally challenged with their reading skills, as a number of low income men are, will not be encouraged to participate in such a liturgy.

A number of churches are exploring how to make worship more user-friendly. There is not necessarily a particular method in mind in doing this, but simply to be more attractive especially to those who might not be familiar with particular styles of worship. If we look at our liturgy, do we really need so much reading material? Can we simplify worship and still have it meaningful? Why do the lessons have to be read by the members? What's wrong with just listening to the spoken word instead of having to read along as it is being read? Can we sing songs that are easy to learn or can be learned by repetition? If we do not want to eliminate the written word, can we print the entire service in the bulletin, including the music, so at least there is not a need to juggle several books and a bulletin? If a church has the resources, project the service on a screen where everyone can see it and follow along.



Where there is an opportunity, we must intentionally include men and boys in the service. If men and boys do not see others in roles such as readers, acolytes, in the choir and lay ministers, then they will not feel that there is a place for them with this aspect of the worship community. This is especially true when the head of the worship is a female. Keep in mind, we are talking about attracting men and boys to church; if all they see are women leading the worship, then they will not be encouraged to be involved. There has to be a balance. This is especially important for young boys who have one foot out the door anyway. Make the acolyte corps something that they want to be involved in. Give them an opportunity to stand before the congregation and be a reader on Sunday morning. If they play instruments, create an opportunity for them to play their instruments on Sundays or special celebrations. They will not be involved if they are not feeling that this is a role that they can serve in and still feel “manly” about it when they are in their teens. Most churches still have “Men’s” day in their worship calendar. Make this day a “Men and Boys” day so that boys can be included and see role models, in church, that would encourage their involvement. Have men bring boys to church who don’t have a father in the home. Have a speaker who will give a special message about being “Men and Boys of God.” Lift them up and give them praise for being “Godly men and boys.” Give them opportunities to serve in special ways on that day (actually throughout the year, not just on this day). Show how they might serve God in church and community.

An important part of making worship meaningful is making the understanding of scripture applicable to our daily lives. One way of doing this is by forming Bible groups and spiritual formation programs that can enhance the understanding that is shared on Sunday mornings. An effective way of doing this is intentionally forming male only



Bible study and spiritual formation programs. I know that this is not seen as the politically correct thing to do in some circles. However, we are faced with a larger question than just being “politically correct.” We are seeking ways of reconnecting men to God and of holding on to those who are on the verge of leaving. We are attempting to get men to want to learn how God speaks to them. We want them to see how God moves in their lives and in the world. We want men to be able to openly discuss their anger towards God and the church. We want them to express their fears and hopes. We know that this type of discussion would not take place in front of women. I think that we have to risk being politically incorrect for this purpose. If we are to get men to grow spiritually we must create an environment that will allow them to do so without any fear. As Rev. Johnnie Ray Youngblood of St. Paul Community Baptist Church in Brooklyn said, “We need Bible studies that combined Bible study with group therapy and a lodge camaraderie.”<sup>24</sup> The Bible study must be conducted in strict confidentiality so that men could feel free to open up about any subject that they felt was keeping them from having an honest relationship with God and with each other. Most men in Rev. Youngblood’s neighborhood, “the robust ones, the potential leaders, venture no closer than the front door to drop off their women. Their sexuality made them blasphemers, and church was for the holy.”<sup>25</sup> Rev. Youngblood’s philosophy is that the church is not to be a “museum for saints, but a hospital for sinners.” If Black men can find a place where the tough concerns of life can be openly discussed that would be a blessing. The church can be that healing place. It can be that place where Black men can say how they really feel, talk about the demons which possess their souls and how hard it is to shake them. It can be

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<sup>24</sup> Freedman, Samuel L., *Upon this Rock*, New York, Harper Collins, 1982, p.7

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 7



that place where men can face each other and challenge each other on issues like being responsible fathers or owning up to the children they had, but are not recognizing as their own and caring for them. It can be that place where they talk about the pent up frustration of being rejected for employment or a promotion when they know it is racism and want to lash out at somebody, but only end up hurting their wives or children or themselves. The church is the only place where these discussions can take place because it is the only safe place. It is the only place where the trust level can be built to allow for this kind of discussion. It will take recognition by the leadership of the church to see the need to build this trust, but it can be done. As Peter Paris says in his book, *The Spirituality of African Peoples*, “All human experience is both personal and social.”<sup>26</sup> To enable men and boys to feel that God is concerned about their total lives, there must be this focus on the personal and social within the context of the spiritual. African American people are spiritual people in their souls. Once that spiritually is reconnected, there is a freeing of the spirit and soul that wants to be whole.

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<sup>26</sup> Paris, Peter J., *The Spirituality of African Peoples*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1995, p. 2.



# V

## The Million Man March

*"I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing."*  
1 Timothy 2:8

I believe that the Million Man March was the singular spiritual event for Black men in twentieth century America. Against all odds it happened. It was overwhelmingly successful, peaceful, and spiritual. At no time in history, in any country, have over a million Black men gathered together to look at themselves and to pledge to one another to make changes in their lives and in the lives of the communities in which they live. At no time in history has there been such an organizing effort. It was not organized to protest or demonstrate, but to gather for our own self-renewal, regeneration, confession, and collective commitment making. This was such a broad coalition of African American men, from all segments of the community, all classes, representing many different faiths and those without an organized religious affiliation, representing a cross section of the political spectrum and all ages. This was a moment in American history that indeed was a miracle.

The call to gather was issued by Louis Farrakhan, the head of the Nation of Islam, almost two years before the event was to happen. Not many paid much attention believing that it would just be another gathering of the Nation of Islam and those who admire them, but will not join the group. In the days following, Minister Farrakhan began to articulate the call for all men to gather regardless of their affiliation. He began to pull together councils to discuss the concept of Black men gathering in Washington, not to protest, not to rally, but for renewal and rededication, the seed he planted began to germinate. Planning groups organized in every city across the nation. In these gatherings



there was much debate about purpose and direction that would continue to the very day of the march and afterwards. Not everyone in the Black community supported the march by any means. There were African American men and women<sup>27</sup> who were strongly opposed to the idea. Black religious leaders and politicians were interviewed on television stating their opposition to the march. Due to the fact that Minister Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam had a major role in the Million Man March, many who might have supported the effort felt they could not because it might damage their own personal credibility within their support communities, politically and financially. They would not want to be tagged as being anti-Semitic, radical, separatist, all charges associated with the Nation of Islam. For many this was a personal struggle in determining what they were willing to risk. Conservative commentators, Black and white, had a field day over why the march would not happen or would be a failure with a low and insignificant turn out. There were even those who predicted that a gathering of this size in the nation's capital would surely lead to a major riot. While the debate was going on the air waves and in the community, planning meetings continued in cities and small towns. The vision was quickly moving towards reality.

On the night before the march, fifteen men, some from as far away as Boston and Miami, gathered in my house in Washington, D.C. We represented several generations, faith groups and walks of life. I was the only minister. After a communal meal, we sat and talked about our reasons for coming to the march and our hopes for the next day. We

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<sup>27</sup> A number of prominent Black women leaders objected to a march that excluded Black women. Some did so based on feminist philosophy; others because they believed that Black men and Black women should not do anything separately. This is an on-going debate and will arise when there is any suggestion that sometimes being separated by gender is helpful in terms of building the community if that is its end goal. This was indeed the case of the Million Man March.



read the scriptural passage that was to be the theme of the Million Man March, 2

Chronicles, chapter 7, verse 14. It read:

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked way, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

We prayed and discussed what this meant for us, our families and our community. What the men and young men shared was a deep hope for ourselves and for our community that somehow this gathering that was about to take place would be a turning point in our community and in our lives. There was a strong hope that this would bring us a vision of what a strong purpose driven community with a collective spirit could accomplish. A community would arise that would seek to end violence and injustice and work together for the betterment of all of our lives. Collectively we had all participated in some form of demonstration or march before. We knew, however, that this was already different from all of the other demonstrations that had taken place before including the 1963 march on Washington. This was our event. It was for us and not against anything except that which keeps us from moving forward individually and collectively. We were not asking for anything or protesting against the government or a war. We were gathering for us and talking about us and what we had to do to change the human condition and, most importantly, we were acknowledging that for us our relationship to God was an important part of anything that we might possibly could or would do. This was to be a spiritual experience. In the African tradition, we called upon the ancestors to be with us for the historic occasion that would take place the next day.

With great excitement, we left the next morning, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1995, for the march. As we arrived at the Washington mall at the foot of the Capitol, at 8 am, we could



see streams of men coming by foot. Other long lines of buses from every direction were also approaching the Mall. This steady flow of men and boys would continue all morning until about noon. It was very evident that there would be over one million men, African American men and boys, all gathered for a day of inspirational messages and songs of encouragement. As Anderson Franklin would state in his book, *From Brotherhood to Manhood*, “this march was an expression of a deeply shared understanding about the weight of being a Black man in America.”<sup>28</sup> Religious figures, politicians, movie stars, sports figures, would bring their words of understanding and encourage us to move forward with a collective spirit. The collective spirit amongst us was so great that often throughout the day, you would see groups of men embracing, with tears of joy and disbelief that this was actually happening. There were intergenerational groups of men, grandfathers, their sons and grandsons. I could only imagine the emotions that our elders felt as they witnessed the love and togetherness of the crowd in Washington, D.C., the nation’s capitol. Towards the end of this very full day, we were asked to say a pledge together. This pledge asked many things of us. Among them were:

I pledge that from this day forward I will strive to love my brother as I love myself. I, from this day forward, will strive to improve myself spiritually, morally, mentally, socially, politically, and economically for the benefit of myself, my family, and my people.<sup>29</sup>

This was a call for us to see a new day. If we could gather in this way and make this pledge and if we could recognize that with God in our lives we could do other mighty acts such as this, then we could make the changes necessary in our lives and in the community that would indeed make a difference. It would be without question that

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<sup>28</sup> Franklin, Anderson J., *From Brotherhood to Manhood*, John Wiley and Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey, 2004, p.84.

<sup>29</sup> Reid, Frank , Wright, Jeremiah, Birchett, Colleen, “When Black Men Stand Up For God”, African American Images Publishing Company, Chicago, IL, 1996, p. ii.



thousands of men, not all, but thousands would leave the Washington Mall on this day with a new commitment to each other, their sons and families, and to themselves, to change and make a difference in their communities.

For the brothers in my small group this was the most powerful event that had ever taken place in our lives. The youth amongst us, our children, were overwhelmed with a sense of history, a great sense of pride and of purpose. We all were profoundly moved by the experience and committed to each other and to ourselves to return to our respective communities to build a movement with the Million Man spirit in mind. I know that this was the seed for what could be done and needed to be done amongst Black men who I would work with in the days to follow. The spirit of the day, the spiritual nature of the gathering would help lead me to an understanding of the power that men might have if they would recognize God's call upon their lives. The fact that this gathering happened and did so without a single act of violence or harsh words proved that it is possible to move forward. If every church or religious institution had a group of strong and dedicated Godly men, there would be nothing that they could not accomplish for the betterment of our communities.



## The Church and the Hip-Hop Generation

“Your sons and daughters shall prophesy your old men shall dream dreams and your young men see visions” Joel 2:28

“Oh, mercy, mercy me. Things ain’t what they used to be.”  
Marvin Gaye

There is a lot of conversation in the church about the Generation X. Interestingly, in the African American community; this same age group is called the “hip-hop generation.” This is a significant group in terms of today’s culture because they are setting cultural tones and values that greatly influence children and adults that fall on either side of the generally accepted age range that describes this group, those born between 1965 and 1984. These young people were formed by many experiences, but one of the common understandings is that they came of age in an era of post-segregation and global economics. The sociopolitical forces that shaped this generation also shaped how they view institutionalized religion. When we discuss evangelism amongst this generation, we must first understand that really, as Marvin Gaye said, “Things ain’t what they used to be.” There has indeed been a cultural shift.

In his book, *The Hip-Hop Generation*, Bakari Kitwana, asks us to consider the following questions:

How is the world view of young Blacks born between 1965 and 1984 different from those of previous generations? How have high incarceration rates affected our lives? What issues are the focal points for this generation’s activism and political agenda? Why do unemployment rates of young Blacks remain twice those of their white counterparts? What distinguishes this generation’s war of the sexes from that of our parents? What does it mean to be the first generation of African Americans to come of age in post-segregation America? How has coming of age amidst an emerging global economy influenced our worldview? These



questions—the answers to which begin to explain this generation’s career choices, relationships, education, music, politics, activism, and lifestyle—probe the roots of the crisis that now threaten to envelop us.<sup>30</sup>

In my research, I have spoken with members of the hip-hop generation. I talked with them about God. They said that they are spiritual and have a relationship with God. They said also that they do not go to church. Indeed they would echo the reasons that have been outlined earlier in this work for the reasons most often given why African American men do not attend church. But there is more with this generation. They have been formed in a time where there is a real value shift; a purposeful and deliberate break from what the previous generation values. There is also a distancing from the past norms and expectations. Much of this is driven by what they believe are the failures of the past to live up to its promises in terms creating the just society and economic opportunities for all. What is the church’s response to these significant changes? What does the church have to say to this generation? The questions posed by Bakari Kitwana will help us find some of the answers.

There have been numerous studies concerning what influences generations today. Most indicate that the church is low on this list. In the generations leading up to the 1960’s the values of Black youth were largely formed by traditional community institutions, among which were family, church and school. Kitwana says that today the influence of these traditional purveyors of Black culture has largely diminished in the face of powerful and pervasive technological advances and corporate growth. Now media and entertainment such as pop music, film and fashion are among the major forces transmitting culture to this generation of Black Americans.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Kitwana, Bakari, *The Hip Hop Generation*, Basic Civitas Books, New York, 2002, pp. xxi-xxii.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p.7.



The influence crosses class and even racial lines and is not limited to urban or suburban communities. What we are seeing is a dramatic redefining of the values of this generation's worldview, such that the importance of parental influence is diminished, replaced by the powerful influence of peers and the global media access. In Black America in the generations before 1985, the political hopes and dreams of the civil rights and Black power movements still had an influence on our worldview. The values of family, spirituality, social responsibility, educational achievement and Black pride were central and gave us our identity. Respect for elders was real, even though we might not always agree. Respect for women and girls in terms of behavior and language was present. This no longer is the case. Believing in institutional structures is almost non-existent. This is largely due to the lack of fulfillment of the "promises of the American dream." A good education does not necessarily lead to a good job, attendance at church does not always lead to a fulfilled life, and the government promises to end discrimination have still not become a reality. This new generation has a different set of core values. For the most part, this generation has turned inward, to peers, to global images and products for guidance and for living in the present and the now.

The culture of this generation is shared worldwide. Corporate mergers, particularly in the media and entertainment arena have allowed youth worldwide, and Black youth in particular, to connect and share and be influenced by common values and trends. This generation is a "nation" without borders. Rap music, music videos, designer clothing, popular Black films and television shows give identity and values. The worldview of this generation is heavily shaped by current trends, the global economy, continuing segregation, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the public policy



of the police, criminal justice system, media representation of youth and finally the general shift in the quality of life amongst youth are all included in these trends.

Of major concern, and yet not generally being discussed, is what Kitwana refers to as “the intensifying war going on inside Black America itself. The divide between the hip-hop generation and that of our parents (the civil rights/Black power generation) has not yet registered on the radar screen of cultural critics, activist, or policy makers.”<sup>32</sup> Parents, grandparents and civil rights leaders look at the values and actions of the hip-hop generation and say they “embarrass the race” and “they overturn all the gains of acceptability by the larger population (i.e. white) that have been made over the last thirty or forty years.”<sup>33</sup> One area that is pointed out as indicating a decline in social responsibility and values amongst the hip-hop generation is the decline in youth membership and attendance in the Black church. The church in the Black community was seen as a “community haven of spiritual centeredness and respectable values.” The National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago reports that “attendance of eighteen to thirty-five year olds has dropped 5.6 percent from 1995 to 2000.”<sup>34</sup>

The gap between the generations is an obstacle for the progress of the African American community. We understand, as Frantz Fanon states in the *Wretched of the Earth*, “Each generation out of relative obscurity, must discover their mission, fulfill it or betray it.”<sup>35</sup> However, the older generation can not ignore, write off, or take for granted the new Black youth culture. On the other hand, the new Black youth culture cannot continue to disrespect, deny, or take for granted the gains made by their parents and

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid p.22.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid p.22.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid p.22.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid p.23.



grandparents, however incomplete. Lack of attention to this growing divide can only impede forward movement, leading to a crisis that will lead future generations into a terrible wasteland without any direction and/or purpose. Add to this generational divide the growing economic divide between the middle class and the working class, the unemployed and you have a crisis in the making within the Black community. As a young man of this hip-hop generation said to me in the riot streets of Cincinnati, “You, (the church), have nothing to say to me!” Is that true? Is the church so out of the picture that it is not even part of the discussion?

Some in the church are looking at this turning away from the church by this youthful generation and are trying to find ways to bridge the gap. The popular and best selling gospel singer, Kirk Franklin has introduced “gospel rap” as a way of reaching those young people in church and out of church. He along with some other former gospel singers started out in a very promising effort to bring the Gospel message to young people in a form that was attractive to them. In the process of becoming a commercial success, however, they seem to have lost their focus and purpose. Responding to the possibility of greater sales and in order to have their music played on commercial radio, they were instructed to take out the “Jesus language.” How can you sing gospel music without talking about Jesus?

Even so, the vision of reaching young people using their musical forms caught on. Many churches are forming youth gospel rap groups to reach young people in the Black church and to attract those who do not attend church. The music is appreciated. Step teams, dance/drill teams, with roots in the South African boot dance, have been popularized by Black fraternities and sororities in this country and are now often seen as



part of the activities of youth groups in Black churches. These efforts are useful ways of reaching and attracting young people, but they do not respond to the deeper questions held by the hip-hop generation in regards to their relationship to God, their purpose for life and living and the other important values that form their lives. You can't sing away or dance away the pulls of society that make religion a low priority in the lives of this generation. Cornel West, a Black scholar from Princeton University, who himself made a rap CD, "*Sketches of My Culture*," which was aimed at youth, talks about the rise of nihilism amongst Black youth culture.

Even though the civil rights movement achieved great progress, even though we came of age during the largest economic expansion in our country's history, even though Black youth are more visible than ever and have become icons of American popular culture, they are still demonized in American society. Hence, there is a prevailing sense among Black youth that our parents, like American society, have failed us.<sup>36</sup>

The media, especially the new Black films, address nihilism, however indirectly. A popular film *Menace II Society*, gives a picture of the conflict within a young person trying to live the religious life in the face of peer pressure. The historic Black values of the religious life are depicted as meaningless and odd, and so the religious figure is ridiculed every time he attempts to show his religious growth and to express spiritual values. In the film, the character who has very few of the traditional values survives, while the religious figure is killed indicating in the film's logic, that his new found spiritual values have no relevance in the "rough, tough, and dangerous hood." Rap gospel songs and step dancing to rap music can be seen as a way to get young people in the door. It will not be enough to keep them there if there is not an effort to help them find the answers to life.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid p. 126



How does the church speak to a generation that “gave birth to itself?” Rev. Otis Moss, III, of Tabernacle Baptist Church, Augusta, Georgia, himself just 29 years of age and therefore a part of the hip-hop generation, says that “too many churches are running an eight track ministry in a MP3 and CD world.”<sup>37</sup> We can’t begin to reach this generation using the old traditional methods. We also can’t reach this generation and not talk about the realities of the world and the times in which they live. This generation was born in the now. Everything is instantly brought into their lives. They are not part of a “cultural continuum.” Building on the efforts of our forefathers and mothers is not part of their thinking. This is a disposable culture, if it is not working for you today, it is of no use. How do I deal with today is of primary importance. Issues such as AIDS, sexuality, male-female relationships, the high unemployment amongst Black men specifically, crime and violence, the relationship of the police and the court system in regards to Black men, all are issues which cannot be ignored as if they did not exist and should be discussed in the church settings if the church is expected to be relevant to the lives of this generation.

The Rev. Otis Moss, III and others who are spiritually-centered activist ministers understand that the church must make the transition if it is to speak to the present and future generations. Among this new breed are Jamal-Harrison Bryant, founder and pastor of the Empowerment Temple AME Church, Baltimore, Maryland, 30 year old Ivan Douglas Hicks in Indianapolis, and 26 year old Charles Jenkins in Chicago who represent a rise of young ministers with a social mission. Wright’s Empowerment Temple requires church members to join the NAACP, register to vote, and read a book a month, in addition to participating in a host of cultural and political activities. Interestingly, Wright

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<sup>37</sup> Rev. Otis Moss, III, Interview June 2003.



does look back when he says, “the church will have to go back to its original focus—to be all things to all people.”<sup>38</sup> Our community is in crisis and in a survival mode. Helping our community survive is what the Black church historically has been about. Today we must do more. It is not about just surviving. It is about growing creatively in the power and image of God. What the older generation must do, which I am afraid we are not very good at, is to make a real attempt to listen to what this younger generation is saying to us and to the world. I know that it is hard to listen and to even see when the core values and what we as a people have worked for seems to be totally disrespected and, worse, taken for granted. If, however, the Black church is at all serious about understanding the growing general and cultural gap and about reaching them spiritually, then it must engage the hip-hop generation in conversation and listen. We must at least be knowledgeable about what they read, see and listen to. I asked some young men in one of my interviews if any of the music that they listened to has any spiritual content since it is claimed that rap music talks about what is really going on in the lives of young people. They sent me a CD that contained various artists who indeed did talk about God and the Spirit. It sounded sincere and indicated that for some there was a place for “God talk.”

We know that this thing is deeper than just a discussion about presentation style in the church that is going to attract or repel young people. It is also content, fellowship, support groups, acceptance, and truth telling and sharing. There is the question of Black cultural integrity. There must be a plan and it must cover many fronts.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p.159.



## The Plan

“In my Father’s house there are many rooms”  
John 14:2

My involvement in the Million Man March and Cincinnati riots of April 2001 led to a vision to develop a program of spiritual empowerment for African American men and boys. This vision has grown into a ministry which will begin in 2004 called “In My Father’s House Ministries.” It is based on the several passages from scripture that actually say, “In my Father’s house.” The reference from John 14:2 is one. The concept of “In my Father’s House” is also in the story of the “Prodigal Son,” Luke 15:11, which is very applicable to our specific ministry directed towards returning African American men and boys to a deeper relationship with God. The son has left the father and while he is away he comes to his awareness that being with his father is better than being on a journey without him. When he is most alone, he recognizes that there is much for his life in his father’s house, and thus returns to the place that will give him the wholeness of life that he needs. Black men and boys need to believe that “In my Father’s House” they can regain or find their direction and a purpose for living with the support that they need to make the journey. Black men and boys need to know that in God’s house there is room for them. In God’s house there is acceptance, the ability to grow spiritually, physically and mentally.

The plan is to have a multi-level ministry called “In My Father’s House.” All of the ministries will be directed towards bringing African American men and boys into a deeper and empowering relationship with God. The ministry will have four parts:

- I.       Retreats.



- II. Congregational programs
- III. Rite of Passage Programs for Men and Boys.
- IV. A School for Children and Center for Parent Development

These programs will be adapted for use in ecumenical settings and available for all who see the value of having a vibrant men and boy's ministry in their congregation or who seek to have a closer relationship with God, but are not presently members of a church. They will be focused on helping men and boys to grow in their appreciation for the sacred in their lives and the world, and see their roles as being responsible contributors to God's creation in family and community life. They will be designed to reach those in church and those who are on the edges or not attending church at all. Eventually there will also be programs for use in prisons.

### **Retreats:**

Retreats are a very useful tool to bring people together for spiritual reflection, self evaluation and conversation. They can be for those inside the church and those outside the church. As Rev. Otis Moss III, said, "Men are relational. They tend to do things as a result of relations with other men."<sup>39</sup> Men need the opportunity to be in a setting in which the important questions are asked and they do not feel threatened or vulnerable and where their forward movement is affirmed by the others in the group. Retreats are a wonderful way to get men away to gather in fellowship. More importantly, they create an opportunity to study and discuss the important topics that men struggle with such as marriage, fatherhood, being a parent, the role of the material and money in our lives, female-male relationships, identity and racism. Retreats are different than men's

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with Rev. Otis Moss III, June, 2003.



fellowship in a church setting because you have uninterrupted time together. One is not worrying about the next event, next call, the need to be some place else. They also allow for trust to develop amongst the group because there is a level of commitment simply due to the fact that one has committed to take the time to be together with a focused agenda. It is my intention, under the sponsorship of “In My Father’s House,” to run men’s retreats for churches and other groups that wish to explore the challenges of being an African American male and living a spiritual life of commitment. After a retreat, with the group returning to the faith community, these men can now be the seeds for making a new men’s group or helping to develop a stronger bond amongst men in existing groups and they will have a broader purpose, that is, to become spiritual men of God.

Retreats for men who are not in the faith community can be designed for those who wish to talk about God and their lives. For example, I developed a retreat outline for a group of young men, 20 to 25 year olds, most of whom did not attend church on a regular basis or at all.<sup>40</sup> In a conversation with some of them before we agreed to do a retreat, they responded with eagerness to the suggestion of having an opportunity to come together to talk about their lives and their relationship with God. It is my belief that many young men do not have the opportunity to talk with older men about the struggles they are going through. So, they are out there by themselves without any positive relationship with older experienced men and they feel alone. Much of the research on youth gangs will report that older leaders of gangs can attract younger men into the life simply because they develop a relationship that is supportive and affirming to the younger men. The older men become mentors and take advantage of the fact that these young men do not have positive men who will give them any attention or set them on the correct

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<sup>40</sup> See Appendix for Outline.



pathways in life. It is unfortunately true that as high as 80% of young people will grow up with a large part of that time without a father in the house. We often talk about developing and participating in mentoring programs for young Black youth. This surely is needed. But who is talking with the young men 18 to 20 and above? Who is giving them counsel to navigate these treacherous waters that they find themselves in? How do they learn how to make it when they have had no male around in a positive relationship? There is so much fear, so much lack of trust, so much need to always “posture,” to be the “player,” that it is difficult to get to real feelings unless a safe environment is created where trust and unthreatening fellowship can take place. “In My Father’s House” will create opportunities for African American men, who are not in church to come together to talk about God, the spiritual life, and the struggle to live, and not just survive.

A retreat of this nature would be for a week-end. It would include Bible study, group discussion, and videos. The most beneficial model of a men’s retreat would be one that is inner-generational so that the discussion would be informed by the experiences of the past, but also not escape the challenges of the present. Some retreats could be designed for fathers and their teen-age sons and the experience could be a bonding time. The end purpose would be to get the men to begin to reflect on their relationship with God and to take some steps to come into an ongoing relationship with God, possible participation in a spiritual community, an active prayer life and perhaps a community service project with other men. The outcome which we are striving for with these retreats would be to give men a burning desire to focus their lives on becoming spiritual men of God.



## Congregational Programs:

The objective of “In My Father’s House Ministries” in working with men’s groups in congregations is to be a resource for helping them move from simply a fellowship to a group with a spiritual base that is empowering for ministry. The objective with male youth groups would be to help them to grow into spiritually mature men. The Rev. Johnny Ray Youngblood of St. Paul’s Community Church in Brooklyn, N.Y. talks about his Men’s Ministry:

You have to do four things if you are going to attract men into your church. First you have to have ‘one-on-one contact.’ That is, the men need to feel that you are accessible. They need to feel that you feel that you are not above them and that they can talk with you if they need to. Secondly, you need to have a gathering where the men feel that they can talk about what they want to talk about. Not just sports, but the stuff of life that men are struggling with and that there are no boundaries. Men, in the past, felt that church was not a place where they could talk about the things that matter to them as men. Subjects like sex, having children, but not caring for them, sexual affairs, struggling with what it means to be a man, addictions, criminal past lives, oppression. They need a place where they can express their anger towards God and their shame before man. Thirdly, they need to do bible study in relationship to life study. The study of scripture must be relevant. Fourthly, you must de-feminize the clergy position.<sup>41</sup>

Let me speak to what Rev. Youngblood means when he says we need to “de-feminize the clergy.” He is not speaking against women in the ministry. He is referring to the fact that male clergy are often surrounded by women, the altar guild, the flower guild, the Pastor’s support group. Even the bible study and the prayer groups, in most congregations, are made up mostly of women. All Rev. Youngblood is saying is that we need to change this picture by bringing some men into the equation so that men also feel comfortable being around the Pastor.

In our interview, Rev. Youngblood raised another important point and that is the need to help men deal with their own father-son relationship as they move towards

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<sup>41</sup> From an interview with Rev. Youngblood, February, 2002.



building the Father-son relationship with God. This is especially needed, he said, if there never had been a relationship or the relationship never really formed because of abandonment, jail or death. Men need to explore the relationship that they had with their mothers which might have been overpowering. Mothers often have to play the difficult role of being both the mother and father. Many men struggle with their own male identity because they never had strong male role models around while growing up. Some men over compensate, having children to “prove they are men” or becoming physically abusive again to show that they are “men.” Within the setting of the church where a level of trust can be developed and confidentiality must be created, in the context of Bible study, men can look at these issues. The “Invitational Bible Study” method developed in Kenya, Africa, is a very effective way to get men involved in discussion within the context of Bible study. It is an effective way of “opening up” the Bible study process.

What “In My Father’s House Ministries” will offer to a congregation will be a six week program. There will be several models depending upon the need, whether it is for existing groups or building a group. There will, of course, be a different design for adults and youth. The over-all goals will be the same:

1. An overview of the role of God and spiritual communities in the lives of African and African American people.
  - a. Africa
  - b. Slavery
  - c. Post-slavery
  - d. Present day
2. Challenges to being spiritual men (boys) of God. (Using Jawanza Kungufu’s 21 points as a means of discussion.)
3. The study of scripture as a way of enabling men (boys) to meet the challenges of being men (young men) in contemporary society.
4. The use of prayer as a resource for survival and growth.



5. Exploration of what being a spiritual man (boy) of God means in relationship to God, church, family, community and self.

6. Responding to God's plan for us and becoming empowered to be spiritual men (boys) of God. Taking the next step.

A ministry for men and boys in prison would have a similar outline and work through the established prison chaplains. There would be an emphasis on the strength that comes from being a directed man of God to counter the perception that Christianity is a passive religion. Our work together would also include the study of those in scripture who overcame difficulties and challenges because of their faith. In addition, those men and women in contemporary society who were able to conquer fears, great odds or daunting challenges will also be studied.

### **The Rite of Passage Programs:**

There is an absence in our community of transition rituals for boys moving into manhood. Consequently many of our youth move from boys to men with little idea of what it means to be a man. A number of African American congregations responded to this void by developing "Rite of Passage" programs for their youth. Popularized in the seventies and eighties with the African identity movement, churches incorporated these types of manhood training programs to fill this void in our communities and by doing so also found a way of relating the spiritual world with the secular world that our youth are often challenged by. In addition, these "Rite of Passage" programs included an opportunity for elders to bond with the young boys as mentors or guides and to pass on the stories and ways of survival to meet the challenges of the future. Often touching on African and African American history, identity issues, male and female relationships,



financial management, responsibility to family, community, and God, these programs touched most aspects of life.

Dr. Na’im Akbar, an African American psychologist who has studied the psychological development of African American males, says that because there is an absence of these transitional rituals in our communities many men also need to go through a similar program of exploring their history, concerns around developing strong identities, personal development and what does it mean to take on the responsibilities of manhood. In his book, *Vision for Black Men*, Dr. Akbar describes how many men are locked in the male or boy stage of life and have not advanced to becoming men with all that is defined by that term.<sup>42</sup> There is a developmental movement from male to boy to man. This pathway can be a healthy journey if it has a wholesome mixture of mental, physical and spiritual health.

As we develop “Rites of Passage” programs within our congregations we need to include African history, culture and identity formation. We need to include an exploration of moral and ethical concepts that are formed over time as a result of being a Black man in America. When we develop such a program within our congregations, whether for youth or adults, they need to be inclusive of looking at the total self. One can not just speak of spiritual development and not look at the physical and mental development. Life is interrelated, not compartmentalized. That is a western concept, not an African cultural concept. Having a holistic view of life will allow one to begin to understand what they need to do to have healthy lives and communities because they will see how politics is related to health, spiritual life to family life, economics to physical well-being and mental health. As long as one grows up thinking that they are not related, they cannot begin to

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<sup>42</sup> Akbar, Na’im, *Visions for Black Men*, Winston-Derk Publishers, Inc, Nashville, TN, 1991.



take control of their existence. However, when one does see the interrelatedness, they will begin to realize that they are part of history. They will understand that they did not just arrive at the point that they find themselves. They will also learn that there are reasons why they are in the positions that they find themselves, it is not by accident. Simply knowing this fact can make one feel that he can influence his outcomes, not just be reactive. This in turn can strengthen the resolve to change the human condition, motivating them to move forward. It can also guide one towards moving into the positive rather than remaining in the negative patterns of life.

A “Rite of Passage” program for youth and adults must have certain elements. Dr. Akbar says that they must include at least the following:

1. It must include a knowledge of history, especially African and African-American history.
2. It must be holistic, that is, it must include the “mental/social realities, spiritual/moral realities and the physical/material realities” of our lives.
3. We must build upon and lift up our strengths as a “people and become agents of self-determining creatures of change. Any program must be able to show persons how they can become more self-determining.”<sup>43</sup>

Based on the needs expressed in the interviews and the review of other programs, I would add the following:

4. There must be a careful definition of the “sacred,” a definition which the community can agree upon.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p. 15.



5. There must be a connection with a “guide,” an older male, either the father, older brother, male relative, or a male member of the congregation, or a mentor.
6. There must be a sense of community that requires ongoing accountability. Once the individual has completed the ritual, there is a community that one is both responsible to and dependent upon for support and continued encouragement.

This “Rite of Passage” is about transforming. One receives a new identity with new purpose and direction. One puts behind him childish behavior and takes on the challenges and responsibilities of manhood. It is important that the religious community assist in helping African American men and boys in this transition to view the world with a conscious awareness brought about by knowledge of systems and their impact. This is the ability to see the world accurately so that one can make the decisions on how to move forward positively. Quoting Dr. Akbar,

Men, who have come into a consciousness of who they are in terms of their true identity, in terms of their true capacities for knowledge and consciousness, are able to move and to change the world. Men who know themselves in their true identity will not bring about the kind of fatal divisions and distinctions that have managed to destroy us as a people.<sup>44</sup>

“Rite of Passage” programs can have a great impact on the lives of African American men and boys and should be developed age appropriately for use in congregations that wish to focus on the needs the whole person. For youth, the ideal age is between 13 and 16. We suggest that such a program last between ten and fourteen weeks. An outline would be:

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p. 15.



Week One      Concept of “Rite of Passage” and making the commitment.

Week Two and Three    Our History

African

Slavery

Freedom

Week Four    Stages of Development

Male

Male to Boy

Boy to Man

Week Five    Human Sexuality

Week Six    Health Concerns

Week Seven    Financial Responsibility

Week Eight    Education

Week Nine    Politics and Political Systems

Week Ten    Vocation

Week Eleven   Family

Week Twelve   Community

Week Thirteen and Fourteen   The Sacred

Concluding with the Rite of Passage Ceremony

Each week will have an assignment based on the discussion or activity of the week. Each participant will develop a service project that they will do over the year after they complete the Ritual.



In My Father's House Ministries will offer this program for use in congregations. The program works under the belief that most young boys enter into manhood with little understanding of the responsibilities and expectations of being a man. This is not their fault. Society, the church, and most families fail in transferring the information and expect that somehow this knowledge will be acquired. The individual is left on his own to make the connections and to grow into the responsibility. This is also true spirituality. Our programs of "initiation" are very inadequate in giving our youth a sense of what it means to be mature in the faith and the living the Christian life in a committed and responsible fashion. Our youth should not have to play like they know what they are doing as they grow into adulthood, as men or as Christians.

### **The School and Parent Development Center:**

Think of a child asking his or her friend, "Where do you go to school?" The other child responds, "To My Father's House!" To develop the whole being you must begin early in the formative stages. This is why the concept of a school was developed. The plan is to start a pre-school or Head Start program, serving the low to low-middle income African American community, that will be a nurturing center designed to give children a "healthy start, a head start, a fair start, a safe start, and a moral and sacred start."<sup>45</sup> The school will be a family center with strong encouragement for men to become involved in the educational concerns of their children lives in these early years. This is not something the society encourages or expects fathers to do. We seek to change this expectation.

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<sup>45</sup> This is the model of the Children's Defense Fund, a non for profit advocacy group based in Washington, D.C.



One of the goals of the school would be to have a staff that is fifty percent African-American males. All through this paper, I have spoken about the absence of fathers and positive male role models in children lives. I believe that both male and female children will benefit by their presence in the school setting. I believe that having this male presence during these early and formative years will help give these children the balance they need to have a healthy start in life. We will also seek to give the children the communication, math, science and reading skills they need to have a solid foundation as they begin their schooling.

During the evening hours, the school will become a center for parents of the children enrolled. There will be programs for development of parenting skills, financial management, home ownership, and time management. We will partner with other programs that seek to help fathers reunite with their families and children. We will have counselors available for employment, financial and educational counseling, whatever it takes to build and maintain strong family units. As we look at the whole family unit, we will encourage the exploration of religious values and church involvement as part of the family support network.

This is the “Plan” of the “In My Father’s House.” It is a vision that will be a reality in the very near future.



## VIII

### The African American Man of God

“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” Isaiah 43:19-20

It was in 1974 that I first read this poem by my friend and mentor Haki Madhubuti. Haki is a poet, social commentator, and author of many books and the founder of the oldest African American publishing company in the United States, Third World Press in Chicago. When I first read this poem, “You Will Recognize Your Brothers,” I was the founder and minister for the Alexander Crummell Center for Worship and Learning, a mission and program sponsored by the Episcopal Diocese of Michigan and the Office of Black Ministries for the Episcopal Church. The Crummell Center was an intentional community of African-American men, women and their families who were trying to relate their spiritual lives to their political activism. This poem by Haki gave the brothers in the community a vision of what we were striving for in our own lives. I include it here because I believe it holds as much of a true goal for Black men and boys today in 2004 as it did when it was written thirty years ago in 1974.

#### “You Will Recognize Your Brothers”

You will recognize your brothers  
By the way they act and move throughout the world.  
There will be a strange force about them.  
There will be unspoken answers in them.  
This will be obvious not only to you but to many.



The confidence they have in themselves and in their people will be evident in their quiet saneness.

The way they relate to women will be clean, complimentary, responsible, With honesty and as partners.

The way they relate to children will be

Strong and soft, full of positive direction and as example.

The way they relate to men will be that of questioning our position in the world,

Will be one of planning for movement and change,

Will be one of working for their people,

Will be one of gaining and maintaining trust within the culture.

These men at first will seem strange and unusual but this will

not be the case for long.

They will train others and the discipline they display

will be a way of life for many.

They know that this is difficult

but this is the life that they have chosen

For themselves, for us, for life:

They will be the examples,

They will be the answers,

They will be the first line builders,

They will be the creators,

They will be the first to give up the weakening pleasures,

They will be the first to share love, resources and vision,

They will be the workers,

They will be the scholars,

They will be the providers,

They will be the historians,

They will be the coaches,

They will be the doctors, lawyers, farmers, clergy

And all that is needed for development and growth.

You will recognize these brothers

And

They will not betray you.<sup>46</sup>

“In My Father’s House” will be a ministry that builds a stronger relationship of

African American men and boys to their God. The goal is, as men and boys develop a

personal spiritual relationship with God, they will be motivated to live out the calling of

that relationship. This will lead to a deeper and more responsible relationship to wives,

partners, children and family. As a result, these men will become more active and

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<sup>46</sup> Madhubuti, Haki R., *Tough Notes: A Healing Call*, Third World Press, Chicago, 2002.



involved in their spiritual communities and heed the call to be spiritual examples and mentors for others. Young boys will develop a life with God at the center. Their world view will be a spiritual world view and it will give them a basis upon which to make the decisions that impact their lives. Another goal is that the family and spiritual community involvement of these men will lead them to examine the issues which impact the lives of those in the family and community, such as education, employment, housing, crime and violence, police community relations, issues of peace and the environment and politics in general. James Cone says that Martin Luther King showed him that “no interpretation of the Christian faith could be valid without an engagement of the issues of justice in the society and the world.”<sup>47</sup> You can see the relevance therefore of this poem by Haki Madhubuti. It says what kind of new men these brothers will become. Another writer had a similar vision many years ago,

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

“You used to walk these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to one another, since you have taken off your old practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in the knowledge of its creator.” (Colossians 3:7-10)

“Therefore as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience...for all of these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” (Colossians 3: 12-14.)<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Thistlethwaite, Susan Brooks, and Engel, Mary Potter, Editors, *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies for the Underside*, James Cone, “God Is Black”, Harper, San Francisco, 1990, p. 81.

<sup>48</sup> *Life Application Bible*, NIV, Tyndale House Publications, Inc. Wheaton, Illinois, 1999.



This then is not some idle dream. This work is the fulfillment of God's calling upon us.

To build the community of the faithful who will live out the reality of the people of God in body, mind and spirit and be instruments of God's love, empowerment and liberation.

The Black man is painted as one with all the odds against him, large numbers in jail, and small numbers in college. He's on drugs, unemployed, with AIDS, and plagued with many other major health concerns. There is another picture emerging and it is a growing and positive picture. It is the picture of Colin Powell, Secretary of State, flying around the world negotiating with world leaders on issues of war and peace and economics. It is a picture of CEOs of Fortune 500 Companies, Richard Parsons of AOL, Kenneth Chenault of American Express, Stanley O'Neal of Merrill Lynch. We see a picture of Black Enterprise Magazine, a very successful monthly business and investment magazine for the Black community begun by Earl F. Graves. A recent cover of Black Enterprise has pictures of millionaire Black lawyers, Johnnie Cochran and Willie Gary. We have moved way beyond the top people in our communities being just the preacher, teacher and the undertaker. Congressman and Mayors, business owners and leaders of community organizations besides just the NAACP and the Urban League. In addition, recent studies indicate that the proportion of African American children living in intact, two parent families had risen significantly between 1995 and 2000, from 34.8 to 38.9.<sup>49</sup> There is beginning to be a breakthrough in sports with Tiger Woods, the Williams sisters, and African American quarterbacks and coaches of the major football teams, owners of basketball teams. Robert Johnson, formerly owner of Black Entertainment Television, recently purchased a North Carolina basketball franchise.

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<sup>49</sup> Clayton, Obie, Mincy, Ronald B., Blankenhorn, David, *Black Fathers in Contemporary American Society*, Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 2003, p.165.



There is also the example of young entrepreneurs such as Russell Simmons, who created a business industry including a major clothing line (Phat Farm), now in the top department stores, a record and recording company and T.V. program production company. He is just thirty-four years of age. We are constantly exposed to Rap artists who live in big houses, drive very expensive cars, but who also have a major say in the production of their music. There is a difference to be noted here. If there would be a way, and I believe that there is, to get some of these persons also on track with speaking about God in their lives in a public way and or involved with speaking with Men's groups that are searching for this relationship and a change in their lives, perhaps we can get others to see the connection of "raising the ship together."

Black men have never had more opportunity for success than they do today. Yet, we are watching the largest group of Black males in history stumbling through life with a ball and chain wrapped around their legs. If brought together in one incorporated region, the population of Black males behind bars would instantly become the twelfth largest urban area in America. Add to it that the ravages of AIDS, murder, poverty, and illiteracy, the raging anger between many Black men and women, and the widening gap separating the Black elite from the so-called underclass, and you have a prescription for a paralyzing pessimism.<sup>50</sup>

Too many brothers believe, sincerely believe, that there has not been any change in America that is going to make any difference in their lives and they have given up on God and blame God for it being that way. They do not know of the Colin Powells, the Vernon Jordans. They do not know who they are, much less what they do. How can you be inspired by someone that you do not know exists? If older men feel this way, what about the younger generation? The above examples of progress mean nothing to the young men who I see standing in groups on street corners in the poor communities in every urban center. They don't know the names or the success of those mentioned above.

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<sup>50</sup> Cose, Ellis, *The Envy of the World*, Washington Square Press, New York, 2002, Introduction.



Too many of them are among the fifty percent or higher that drop out of high school every year in major cities around the country. Too many cannot read or write above a 9<sup>th</sup> grade level, if that high, and are facing a life with no skills to offer and therefore turn to the underground economy for survival. They see jobs going elsewhere that they can do and wonder who cares about them and their future. Too many will be caught in the Black on Black killing spree that has taken over seventy lives mostly of Black men in the city of Cincinnati over the last year. I do not believe that God intended those of us who can possibly make a difference to accept this. We have to be committed to the vision in the poem “You will Recognize Your Brothers” and to the goals of the Million Man March, because we have no choice if we are to survive as men, as brothers and as a community without losing the blessing of who we are, a gift of God to his creation.

African American male spirituality is about the wholeness of our being in relationship to a God who is the center of our lives. It is how we come to understand our lives as people of God, not based solely on the realities of the world, but rather in our grounding as God’s children. It is this understanding of God that moves us to embrace a theology of liberation. We must have within our communities the discussions which move us towards this theology of liberation and which directs us in witness to the ending of all forms of oppression. If we are to reach Black men and boys, then it must be through a God who they believe is a loving and forgiving God. A God who invites us into a relationship of reconciliation that will make us whole. We must present a God who gives answers that lead not just to survival, but also to success in attaining life’s goals. This must be a God that will bring liberation that enables His creation to become all that it can be in power and in glory. There is such a God and this God has room in his house.



## Appendix

### A Week-End Retreat for African American Men

#### Return of the Prodigal Son

##### Friday Evening

Arrival and Settling In

Dinner

First Gathering

Introductions

Let's talk about Manhood. What does it mean to you?

Bible Study Luke 15:11-13a. "Coming of Age" We will use the Kenyan Invitational Bible Study method. In small groups of six, one person reads the text and responds to the first question. He then invites another in the group to respond. Each person is invited to respond to the first question in this manner. Another person reads the passage a second time, this time responding to the second question. He then invites another to respond as before until every one has an opportunity to answer the second question.

Question:

What word comes to your mind when you think of being a man?

What do you think God, the Father, owes you as your inheritance as his son?

General Discussion

Video: *Juice*, a coming of age film about a young African American boy growing up in the violent streets of Brooklyn, N.Y., facing strong peer pressure and making a decision to turn towards life not death.

##### Closing Prayers

##### Saturday

Breakfast

Second Gathering

Bibles Study: Luke 15:13b-16

"Being On Your Own"

Questions:

What expectations did you have being on your own?

Can you identify with any of the challenges that the son faced being on his own?

Discussion: In life where decisions must be made, what or who do you call upon to help you make the critical decisions that you face? Do you call



upon your upbringing, your family, your friends, what society expects of you or no one?

Break

General Discussion about Suffering:

In your Bible study groups discuss the three questions and bring back to the general body your responses.

Why do you feel that there is so much suffering in the world?

Crime, drugs, illness, death, separation and divorce, loneliness, war, AIDS, homelessness, hunger, poverty and racism?

How do you think God is asking us to respond to suffering?

Where is God in all this?

Lunch

Third Gathering

Bible Study: Luke 15: 17-20a Returning Home

Questions:

What does the statement “Then he came to his senses” mean to you?

What might have kept the son from admitting that he made a mistake?

When you think of the concept “sin” what do you think that it means?

General Discussion

Break

Evening Prayer

Dinner

Fourth Gathering

Bible Study: Luke 15: 20b-24 The Reception

Questions:

If you were the Father, how would you have responded to the son’s return?

Why do you think that the Father responded as he did and how did that make you feel?

General Discussion



**Video** *Antwon Fisher.* This is the story of a young man getting in touch with his anger by reconnecting with his family. His journey is guided by a positive relationship with a psychologist.

Discussion

Closing prayer

Sunday

Breakfast

Final Gathering              The Prodigal Son

In your Bible study groups discuss the following questions:

1. How is the father God in the story?
2. How are you the son?
3. What would it take for you to go home to the father?

General Discussion

Next Steps

Closing Worship

Lunch

Leave for home.



## Recommended Reading List

Na'im Akbar, *Vision for Black Men*, Winston-Derk Publishers, Inc, Nashville, TN, 1991.

Herb Boyd and Robert L. Allen, *Brotherman: The Odyssey of Black Men in America-An Anthology*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1999.

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Terrance Dean, *Being Empowered*, Writers Club Press, Lincoln, NE, 2001.

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## Interviews Sources

The interviews which I conducted were done over several years. The persons interviewed were chosen because of the generation that they represented, location, types and size of ministries and to get a mix of denominational types. Some were chosen because I knew that they had growing men's ministries in their congregations. They were all conducted in person. In our interviews, I included the following three questions

1. What programs do you have in your church for men and boys that might strengthen them spiritually?
2. Do you have any outreach programs that are focused on recruiting men into your congregation?
3. Why do you think more men are not active in your congregation, especially in the Bible study and prayer groups?

I interviewed the following ministers:

1. Rev. Johnny Ray Youngblood, Sr. Pastor, St. Paul's Community Church, Brooklyn, N.Y., February, 2002.
2. Rev. Otis Moss, III, Tabernacle Baptist Church, Augusta, GA., June 2003.
3. Rev. William Land, Amistad United Church of Christ, Cincinnati, OH. April, 2003.
4. Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. Trinity United Church of Christ, Chicago, IL, April, 2000.
5. Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker, Sr. Pastor, Canaan Baptist Church, Harlem, N.Y., June 2002.
6. Elder Thurman E. Evans, Morning Star Community Tabernacle, Linden, New Jersey, June, 2002.
7. Rev. Rudy Rasmus, St. John's United Methodist Church, Houston, Texas, August 2002.



8. Rev. Cecil Murray, Senior Minister, First AME Church, Los Angeles. August, 1993.
9. Rev. Nelson Foxx, Rector, St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, Cambridge, MA., April, 2002.
10. Rev. Jesse L. Wood, Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio, 2003.

I also talked with a number of other pastors on an informal basis about programs they might have for men and boys. There are a number that have programs to attract youth, but few that have programs targeting the adult male population except for the occasional sports outing. Many Black congregations have a Men's Day program and a Men's Fellowship. Neither give much focus to the spiritual aspects or needs of men and boys. Among younger leadership in the church there is recognition that there is a need for spiritual development amongst men and boys and they are attempting to give focus to program development in this area.

Finally, In October of 2002, in Miami, Florida, I met with four young African American men who are friends of my son. They were all between 21 and 25 years of age. I asked if they would be willing to sit and talk with me about their relationship with God. They were all eager to do so. Our time together was in the form of an interview and I asked the following questions:

1. Do you believe in God?
2. Do you attend church? If not now, did you ever attend church and when and why did you stop?
3. Do you feel that your peers are spiritual? Do you ever have discussions about God?



4. How do your spiritual beliefs impact your life in terms of daily behavior and what is important to you?
5. What would you be looking for in a spiritual community that might lead you to become a member?

The responses to the questions gave support to many of the findings of Jawanza Kunjufu's research in *Adam: Where Are You?*







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